CORONET

DENISE ROBINS

Wait for Tomorrow

WAIT FOR TOMORROW

He had a distinctive smile. Just a crooked upward tilt of the mouth on one side, and a narrowing of his eyes. Eyes of an almost startling blue in a face deeply tanned by sun and wind and the salt of the sea. Charlotte always felt that Luke could never be anything but closely connected with the Cornish coast. He ran the Gull Rock Inn down in St. Nevell. She hardly remembered seeing him in anything but a coarse blue fisherman's jersey which he wore with shorts in the summer, heavy corduroys in the winter, and long fisherman's boots. He was a stranger today in a town suit and tie—rather crookedly tied, in fact—the white cuffs so very white against his big walnut-brown hands. He certainly didn't belong to London. He might have tried to smooth his hair—dark, almost black—down for this visit, but it stood up—that was the way it grew—springing from a forehead curiously lined for so young a man.

Handsome in the accepted sense he was not, but he gave the impression of fresh masculine good looks. His height was unusual, like the breadth of his shoulders. To Charlotte he was one hundred per cent a man, yet seemed to have an almost feminine understanding of women.

**Also by the same author,
and available in Coronet Books:**

Swing Of Youth
All That Matters
Put Back The Clock
Reputation
The Wild Bird
And All Because
To Love Is To Live
The Cyprus Love Affair
Forbidden
House Of The Seventh Cross
The Boundary Line
Desire Is Blind
Love Was A Jest
The Enduring Flame
The Noble One
Laurence, My Love
The Snow Must Return
Gay Defeat
Do Not Go My Love
All For You
I Should Have Known
The Unlit Fire
Shatter The Sky
The Strong Heart
Stranger Than Fiction (Autobiography)
Once Is Enough
The Passionate Flame
This Spring Of Love
We Two Together
The Story Of Veronica
To Love Again
The Crash
Arrow In The Heart
A Promise Is For Ever
Love And Desire And Hate
A Love Like Ours
Mad Is The Heart
Sweet Cassandra

Wait for Tomorrow

Denise Robins

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder Paperbacks Ltd., London

For Jean Twiddy

Copyright © 1967 by Denise Robins
First published in Great Britain by
Hodder and Stoughton Limited 1967

Coronet edition 1969
Second impression 1971
Third impression 1975

The characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any real person or actual happening.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which this is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Printed and bound in Great Britain for
Coronet Books, Hodder Paperbacks Limited,
St. Paul's House, Warwick Lane,
London, EC4P 4AH
By Cox and Wyman Limited,
London, Reading and Fakenham

ISBN 0 340 10882 7

WAIT FOR TOMORROW

'Love is a sorrow
Passion's belonging,
Waits for tomorrow.'

1

It all began when the mirror hanging over Mrs. Harvey's satinwood bureau in the sitting-room broke loose from its moorings. It crashed on to the top of the charming, rather fragile bureau, smashed a French porcelain clock to pieces, bent the two ormolu candlesticks, and sent a leather-framed photograph of John Harvey spinning across the room. The lid of the bureau, which was locked, was torn open. A pile of letters, envelopes and papers was scattered over the floor. The mirror itself landed on its face and the glass shattered into a thousand pieces.

When Charlotte Harvey and old Miss Fish, who had been having elevenses together in the kitchen, rushed upstairs to see what had happened, a sorry sight met their eyes. The olive-green Wilton carpet looked as though buckets of chipped ice had been spread all over the thick pile. There was glass glittering everywhere. Old Fish, as the family called her, croaked a warning:

"Oh, my goodness gracious, all that glass! Charlotte, mind how you go —"

Charlotte stood still, staring down at the mirror, noting that the brown paper on the back of it was still curiously intact, but that one of the screws to which the wire had been attached had come out. Looking up at the wall she now saw that it was not the hook that had come adrift. It was still there—solid as ever. So it was the screw on the mirror that must have come away, she decided. Of course it was a very old mirror, possibly worm-eaten at

the back. Funny that no one had ever thought of examining it.

Old Fish, ever practical, said:

"I'll run down and get a dustpan and brush. Don't touch the glass, Charlotte. You know what you are. One little cut and you fester."

"Oh, dear," said Charlotte. She put her hands in the pockets of her tight blue slacks and went on staring at the debris. The heavy mirror had played havoc with the lid of the desk. Mummy would be heart-broken. She was so fond of it. It had belonged to her mother. It was a very private piece of furniture which only Mrs. Harvey used and which she kept locked. Charlotte and her young brother Michael sometimes teased her about it. It was where she kept her love-letters, they said. Michael, who had a strong sense of humour, had once suggested that the letters were so awfully intimate, Mum didn't dare let anyone, even Dad, see them. But this Dad had firmly denied. If there were any intimate love-letters around, they were *his*, he declared. And as far as Charlotte knew, it was true that there had never been anyone else in Mummy's life except Daddy. They had their battles—what normal couple didn't, at times?—but on the whole they seemed to get on. They had been married for twenty-five years—had celebrated their silver wedding in January, six months ago. Luckily it had been when Michael was on holiday, having just left Shrewsbury School. He was now at Grenoble learning languages, waiting to go to Bristol University. The whole family was home to celebrate.

Everybody had said how beautiful Mummy still looked at forty-nine—and Daddy at fifty-two was as upright and boyish-looking as any of his Stock Exchange friends—more so because he had always been careful with his figure.

Mummy was health-conscious, and very careful of her diet. She had regular massage and facials, and wore beautiful, tailored clothes. Her chic appearance was, in fact, rather a bone of contention between Charlotte and her mother. Charlotte was not really interested in clothes. She was too 'mod' for her parents' liking. She wore her light auburn hair long, falling down each cheek, almost hiding her thin pale face. She preferred slacks and jeans to skirts. She also preferred living in the bungalow which her father had built in St. Nevell in Cornwall, near Cadgwith. Ever since Charlotte left her finishing school in Switzerland a year ago, she had rebelled against London life, and anything approximating a deb's existence. She was often told with sarcasm, by her mother, that she should have been brought up on a farm, instead of in her nice home in London.

Charlotte hated London.

Charlotte hated the job she had lately acquired as an assistant in a smart interior decorators' shop in North Audley Street. It was run by one of Mummy's friends. It wasn't that Charlotte didn't like antiques and beautiful curtains and all the things that made her own home so attractive. But being shut up all day from nine to five in any shop, following a business routine, was disagreeable to Charlotte.

As Old Fish was always telling her (and she ought to know, having been Nanny to both children and nursemaid to John Harvey), Charlotte was too moody. Too sensitive; inclined to take offence—undisciplined. Her brother was more easy-going and didn't seem to mind control. It was the girl of the family who was the difficult one—and nobody was more aware of this than Charlotte herself.

She just didn't know what to do with her life. Daddy,

who was a darling, and less critical than Mummy, had once told her that she would be better if she brooded less and made a career for herself. Mummy wanted her to get married, but so far, although the slender auburn-haired Charlotte had had a string of admirers she had fastened her affections upon no one in particular.

She was at the moment in a state of not having 'found herself'. It didn't make things better because her mother held such different views and was such a totally different character from Charlotte. Anthea Harvey was never moody. She often seemed to Charlotte to be rather too calculatingly cool and correct. But, admittedly, she was a success with her husband, her friends and her son—if not altogether with Charlotte. Charlotte secretly admired her and envied her her poise, her grace, her wonderful white skin. She hadn't a wrinkle or a grey hair. Her mouth was rather thin and hard. But her eyes were a truly marvellous blue. As an auburn-haired girl, she had been a famous beauty and one of the debs of her day.

During the war, she had worked tirelessly in the W.V.S. while her husband was away serving in the 'Wavy Navy'. He had spent a considerable time in minesweepers in the North Sea. He had obviously been very much in love with his beautiful Anthea when he married her, and still was. They had a certain amount in common. Both shared a passion for golf, and played together at week-ends. Both enjoyed travelling. Yet Charlotte sometimes believed that her father needed more tenderness, more demonstration of affection than he got from Mummy. So she, his daughter, had always tried to give it to him. She felt a oond with him that was missing in her association with her mother. She disapproved of Mummy's philosophies: almost disliked her when she said things like: "Why don't

you stop brooding and get yourself a nice rich husband, darling?"

Charlotte thought this despicable. There was a strangely puritanical streak in her, at war with her more generous side. She was a fervent idealist. She believed that somewhere, somehow, *something* greater and more worthwhile than what Mummy called a 'good marriage' lay in wait for her.

It seemed to Charlotte that her mother got along better with Michael than anybody. But then Michael was easy-going and a bit of a snob—like Mummy. She kept on saying that he ought to have gone to Eton, but in this Mr. Harvey had opposed her wishes. He was an old Salopian and to Shrewsbury School Michael went.

It was sad, in Charlotte's estimation, that her mother could never really be a friend to her, or understand her and how she ticked. This morning, however, she felt full of sympathy. Mrs. Harvey would return from Paris to find her favourite mirror, her private bureau, and her lovely Sèvres clock, smashed beyond repair.

Old Fish came in with pan and brush and a pair of gloves.

"You put these on, now, Charlotte, and pick up the big bits of glass. I'll sweep up the splinters, then we'll get the Hoover," she said.

Dear Fish, thought Charlotte; nothing ever destroyed her composure. Throughout the years, Charlotte could remember that it was always Fish (Nanny in those early days) who had coped with each minor catastrophe in the Harvey household. Mrs. Harvey could not bear the sight of blood or anybody being sick. It was Nanny who dealt with the unpleasant incidents and who remained imperturbable and helpful in emergencies.

Today, at seventy, Miss Fish was still fit and energetic,

small, thin, grey hair short, skirts long in defiance of modern fashion; fingers knotted and stiff with rheumatism. Even now, as she knelt down, Charlotte saw her grimace with the pain in her knees. The doctor had told Fish she had arthritis, but she was the type to work on until she died. No retirement into an old people's home for Nancy Fish *yet*.

Fish adored Charlotte's parents—particularly John Harvey. She adored Michael too, the baby of the family. Charlotte was not quite sure that she herself came in for so much adoration, although Fish had always been loving and kind to her. Charlotte was intelligent enough to admit that her feelings were, perhaps, prompted by an unreasonable jealousy of her young brother. When she was a child the family used constantly to assure her how much they loved her. She had tried to believe it. But not when she was in one of her black moods. Then she was positive that she came second to her brother in the family affections. She often, in fact, wished that she were a little more like Nanny, temperamentally; that nothing, either good or bad, could rouse her to open display of feeling. Old Fish's emotions rarely, if ever, overflowed. Even when her only, much-loved, sister had died suddenly of a heart attack, she had not shed a tear in front of the family. She had just gone with the bad news to Mrs. Harvey and quietly asked for a couple of days off so that she could attend the funeral and see to her sister's meagre effects. But Charlotte was an extrovert—excitable and impulsive. She leapt quickly into emotional battle, and, as quickly, surrendered. She never bore malice.

Now times had altered. There was less communal family life. Mike was often away. Fish, as a Nanny, became redundant, but she stayed on as cook and very well she did it.

Charlotte was fond of her old nurse. As she picked up the biggest jagged pieces of glass and placed them on newspaper, she said:

"Don't work too hard, Fishie, let Mrs. Parsons get down to it later. It's not your job."

Old Fish looked at her over her spectacles.

"We all have to do things at times that are not our job," she said briskly.

Charlotte laughed. That remark was so Fish-like.

After the glass had been cleared away and Fish had gone downstairs, Charlotte seated herself at the broken desk and started to tidy her mother's letters.

A glance out of the window showed her that it was beginning to rain. It was cold and stormy for early July. The wind forced a way through the three tall windows overlooking Alexandra Square. Charlotte hoped her parents would get back from Paris before the storm worsened. The forecast was bad. What a summer!

It was always warm and attractive in this beautiful house, she thought. Years ago when her father had first bought it, they made extensive alterations. They had cut off the basement, turning it into a self-contained flat, and made a kitchen on the ground floor. The flat was now occupied by the Parsons family. Mr. Parsons worked in the Post Office and Mrs. P. came up every morning to clean the house.

When Mike was away, Charlotte found the house lonely. John Harvey had been complaining that times were bad, and what with the new Labour Government and extra taxation, etc., he was thinking of selling up and moving to a flat. Charlotte wouldn't have minded. Her heart was in Cornwall anyhow, and she only lived for the days when they went down there. But Mummy was fighting tooth and nail against the move. She was

London-born and much preferred her town house, her dinner-parties and her bridge. She had never cared much for the bungalow in St. Nevell, except that in good weather she could play golf down there. She was an excellent golfer. But the summers had been so bad lately that she resented what she called two wasted months in Cornwall and went there only to please her husband and the two children who adored it.

Charlotte suddenly felt glad that her parents would be back tonight. The three of them would have dinner together and she would hear the latest news from Paris. Charlotte's godfather, Gaston Delages, was a Parisian; John Harvey had been at Cambridge with him; Uncle Gasty, so Charlotte called him. She had spent some exciting holidays with her brother in M. Delages' apartment in the Boulevard Suchet.

Charlotte's good looking godfather was a bachelor in his late forties, a handsome, entertaining Frenchman. He had a mistress—Charlotte had met her. Nobody minded about 'Yvonne'.

Gaston Delages came over to London regularly and as Charlotte grew older she found him 'sympathique' and held him in great esteem. He was one of France's most noted novelists. Charlotte in her schooldays studied hard at her French just in order to be able to read all Uncle Gasty's books in the original language.

Humming a little under her breath, she picked up a letter that was still lying on the carpet under the shattered bureau. Her eye was caught by the printed address. 'Bvd. Suchet, Paris' and her own name, *Charlotte.*

Intrigued, Charlotte idly read the letter which she felt sure could not be very private if it concerned her, and was from Uncle Gasty. She had only read one paragraph before she knew it was very private indeed. The letter was

dated the 5th October, 1946, the year after the war ended, two and a half months after she, Charlotte, had been born.

Charlotte read on; she was habitually pale but soon her face began to look positively ashen, and her nostrils were pinched. She trembled violently. She read the whole of this letter now with a terrible, avid curiosity. It was written by Uncle Gasty in his perfect English, addressed to both Charlotte's parents.

My dear John and Anthea,

How flattering to be singled out for the position of godfather to Charlotte Anthea Harvey. I like the names. Of course it makes no difference to me that you have adopted this little daughter. Her background sounds very intriguing and from what you say of her looks, even though she is still an infant, she should grow up to be beautiful. Typically intelligent of you to tell me the truth, and you need have no fear that I shall ever speak of this to a living soul.

Because we are such old friends I venture to offer one criticism. Isn't it a little difficult and dangerous for you, telling everybody that she is your own child? You say that the baby has auburn hair like yours, Anthea, and that everybody will accept your story. But I cannot see what you have against the idea of adoption.

I remember, *mes amis*, so well, how deeply you have both felt the fact that after five years you still had no child, and I know that for a long time you, John, longed for one but that you, my dear Anthea, rebelled against the idea of adoption. Perhaps it was your pride—and we all know how proud you are, dear Anthea—that has made you decide to pretend you are the real mother. However, I am sure you will

carry it off—you have never been anything but tremendously capable of carrying out the most difficult tasks. Naturally I believed you at the time when you told me that you, Anthea, had developed appendicitis when down on holiday in Helston but now I presume the Cornish nursing home was just a cover up. I also suppose that when you brought the baby back to London, everybody took it for granted that Anthea had given birth to it. Quite ingenious. Certainly you can count on my complete discretion. *Cela va sans dire.* And I'm sure the faithful Fish will never let on. But I still think it might lead to trouble that you do not own to the little one being adopted.

I certainly understand why you both preferred to adopt a girl rather than a boy. I agree with you, John, that it wouldn't be fair to let Anthea's mother leave all her money to a grandson who was not in fact her flesh and blood. I remember you once telling me that she held old-fashioned views. Anyhow, I'm sure the little girl will grow up to be a great comfort to you, Anthea.

I am enclosing a cheque on my London Bank for fifty pounds for you to buy my god-daughter a gift. Once the Court settlement of the Adoption has been finalised, you will of course have her baptised. Unfortunately I shall be away for the next six months as I am taking this trip which I have long promised myself, to New York then on to South America.

I will see little Charlotte when I come back—meanwhile, embrace her for me.

Ever yours,
Gaston.

Charlotte read the astounding revealing letter through

twice before she let it drop on to her lap from her shaking fingers. She felt very cold. Her eyes, which were large and of a golden-hazel colour, the most striking feature in her thin young face, looked blank. Her lips opened as though she were about to cry out in protest against what she had just read. Slowly, gradually, the full meaning of it pierced her mind. She was utterly shocked.

"Oh, my God!" she said aloud. *"Oh, my God!"*

There was no mistaking the inference of this letter. She knew now that John and Anthea Harvey were not her real parents. She had been adopted. It was fantastic. She had been *passed off* as their daughter, she thought. Nobody knew about it except Uncle Gasty—and Old Fish. They must have applied to some adoption home for a baby and waited for one with auburn hair. How typical of Mummy! She was no real relation, yet the habit of long years made Charlotte still think of her as 'Mummy'. But how typical of her—selfish, proud and very vain—to want to impress her friends that she was capable of bearing a child, with no consideration for the feelings of the child, itself, should it ever learn the truth.

Charlotte sprang to her feet.

"I should have been told!" she said fiercely, indignantly, "I should have been told."

Thousands of adopted children, who were called 'The Chosen Ones', were told right from the start. To them it was no shock. Why, that friend of hers—Elizabeth Drew, who had been bridesmaid with Charlotte at the Worplesdon wedding last summer—was adopted. *But she knew.* She had always known. She had a sensible self-effacing sort of adoptive mother. Mrs. Drew was cook and Nanny combined—lived only for her family.

Now, all kinds of criticism of Anthea Harvey cracked the thin veneer of affection and regard with which, until

now, Charlotte had covered her antipathy for her supposed mother. She *had* felt antipathetic towards her quite often. On the whole, of course, Mummy had been kind, affectionate and generous. But they had never really had anything in common. It was Daddy whom Charlotte loved. The good-humoured, gentle, rather gallant man with his perfect manners, his strong sense of justice—and his ideals. Charlotte used to feel deep admiration for Daddy and imagined that her best qualities came from him. But they didn't. She was not his flesh and blood. She had inherited *nothing* from either of these so-called parents.

It was ironic how many people used to declare that she looked like her 'mother'. (*That was on account of her auburn hair. An auburn-haired baby had been specially chosen!*)

How well they had kept their secret! Only Uncle Gasty and Fish knew the truth. They had even deceived Lady Craven—Anthea Harvey's mother. Sir Giles Craven, Bart., had served in the Grenadier Guards, leaving Lady Craven a widow when she was only in her late forties. Charlotte remembered her as a tall, thin handsome woman, with an overbearing pride, like her daughter Anthea. She had always been proud of Charlotte, and told her repeatedly that she had left her a handsome legacy. Charlotte's confused, shocked mind began to remember all kinds of other things Granny had said, such as Charlotte bearing such a resemblance to her mother, physically. But temperamentally she was supposed to be like *Daddy's* mother. She had been an emotional, highly-strung person. Now both the grandmothers were dead—but there must be a number of relations still labouring under the delusion that she, Charlotte, was really and truly a Harvey, or a Craven.

How could her parents have lied to her like this? *Daddy* of all people. On his integrity she would have staked her life. Her wildly chasing thoughts rested for a moment on Mike whom she loved as a brother. Was he, too, adopted? Or had Mummy produced a baby of her own eighteen months after Charlotte's adoption? In any case, Mike was not related to her.

"Oh, God!" Charlotte cried out again.

She felt suddenly disembodied. She was nameless, nobody—nothing. She had no right to the name of Harvey nor to her place in this household. It was wicked, *wicked* of Mummy and Daddy to have done this. (She couldn't yet stop thinking of them as her parents, after twenty long years.) Presumably if the mirror hadn't smashed and she hadn't read her godfather's letter, she would never have found out. Why had they kept this damning piece of evidence? Why hadn't they burnt it? That, Charlotte decided, she would find out when she faced her parents with the truth. She was going to face them with it, tonight. She was going to tell them just how she felt about them both—even Daddy, who had been weak enough to agree to the deception.

Charlotte thought: Who am I? *Who was I?* And what were my own *real* parents like?

Suddenly she walked across to the desk again and with shaking fingers rummaged through the scattered papers and picked up a long envelope. It was marked *'Very Secret'* and sealed. She felt a little sick. She also had the intuition that the contents of this envelope concerned her.

With complete lack of regard for honour she tore it open. Why should she respect anybody's privacy after the way they had treated her? She was bitterly resentful.

Her pulses quickened as she saw the heading on the

first letter she pulled out of the envelope. It was marked: 'MARTLETT ADOPTION SOCIETY, CAVENDISH SQUARE'.

With mingled feelings of excitement and loathing, Charlotte sat down and began to read this typed letter which was dated September, 1946, two months after her birth. It was signed by somebody called Margaret Thompson, presumably the woman in charge of that particular Association.

2

THE letter from Gaston Delages had been damning evidence enough for Charlotte but this one from Margaret Thompson was unrefutable confirmation of fact.

Dear Mrs. Harvey,

I was delighted to receive your letter telling me how well little Sophie Nagorski—or Charlotte Anthea as you have decided to call her—has settled down. Also to hear how enchanted Mr. Harvey is with her. I am sorry we did not inform you at our last meeting that you may of course change Baby's names once the Court Order has made the baby legally yours—but not until.

In reply to your other two questions. I'm afraid we are unable to insist on the mother giving the father's name. All we know is that hers is Sophie Nagorski and that he was a young student farmer, twenty-one years of age, of medium height and build, with auburn hair and hazel eyes. I think we did tell you last time we met that the mother, aged seventeen, was on holiday at the same farm, recovering from some minor ailment. As far as we can gather her parents are good middle-class people. Her father was an architect. One interesting point—she is Polish. The maternal grandparents came from Poland during the war. The mother of little Sophie is a pretty, intelligent young thing. It was rather sad because she

never saw the baby. Her parents only consented to take her back if she agreed to the adoption before leaving the maternity home in Barnet.

Please reassure your husband that your name will under no circumstances be revealed to either of Sophie's parents. And as far as Miss Nagorski is concerned, and on the papers she will sign, you are merely represented as Mr. and Mrs. X. Once the period of waiting is over and you and Mr. Harvey go into Court to legalise the adoption, Sophie will be absolutely yours and in no danger of being taken from you. It will just be during this last week that Miss Nagorski could change her mind, but she shows no sign of doing this whatsoever. In fact, I had a telephone call from her father yesterday, thanking us for what we have done and saying they were all relieved to hear we had found a good home for the little baby.

Do write to me again if you have any further questions.

Yours sincerely,
Margaret Thompson.

Charlotte dropped this letter and put her face in her hands. She tried to control the wild turbulence of the feelings that raged through her heart.

Now she knew who she was. *Sophie*. (What an unusual name!) And she had Polish blood in her veins. (That didn't upset her. It interested her.) It accounted for some of the traits in her character, she felt sure. It was also fully comprehensible to her now why she was so unlike her cold, practical, adoptive mother. Nor was she calm and philosophical like the man she called Daddy. No wonder she was temperamentally really not in the least like either of them.

No wonder I adore the country, Charlotte thought. *My own father was a student farmer. It is from him I have inherited my auburn hair, too. Where is he now? Did he ever wish he could see me. And what about my poor little mother?*

Only seventeen when she made her fatal mistake. Charlotte tried to think what she herself had been like at that age. Just an ordinary schoolgirl—still at Downe House, Newbury, where she had been educated. She had been neither particularly happy nor unhappy there, perhaps more settled than most of the girls. She had never been a good mixer. Too much inclined to dramatise herself. Her reports used to suggest that she was 'a little too excitable' or 'needed to learn more control'.

She had never quite conformed to discipline. She wondered how she would have felt if *she* had had an affair then found herself pregnant. Oh, her poor mother must have been very ignorant—*more ignorant than I am*, Charlotte thought grimly.

She, like most of her girl-friends, knew all about sex and contraception. It was surely part and parcel of modern education.

My poor little mother, she thought yet again and felt the tears sting her eyelids.

Now Charlotte found another letter in the long envelope. It had been written to her adoptive father. Formal, cool, containing none of the human element of that other one. It had apparently been sent during the first week of the adoption. Charlotte could see that from the date.

Dear Mr. Harvey,

There is no need for you to wait until the end of your three months' probation visit, which will be for the purpose of making sure you are the right sort of

parents, in order to commence legal procedure for baby's adoption. We shall be glad to help you with the arrangements for this now. You should go to your County Court, and ask for a Serial Number to be allocated to you, as this means that your name and address will not be disclosed to the baby's real mother. You should also obtain two Forms of Application and one Form of Consent under the Adoption Act. If you will send these to us, blank, we will prepare them for you so that you need not instruct a solicitor.

The baby has not been baptised and was registered as Sophie Nagorski. But you can alter or add to this name if you wish. If you do so, please let us know, as all names have to appear on the legal forms. As you do not expect to move from your present London home, there will be no delay in the inspection of the house to which the adopted child is to be taken.

If you will come to our office in Cavendish Square, I can show you photographs of both parents but you will not be allowed to take them away. You understand, of course, that Nagorski is the mother's maiden name but that I cannot tell you the father's. I will, however, question Miss Nagorski about this again on your behalf, but she was adamant about the refusal when we discussed it.

I hope and believe that Sophie's adoption will prove successful. I certainly have no reason to believe that the mother will want the little one back, but, of course, we must wait for the three months. However, don't worry.

With our good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Thompson.

Having read this, Charlotte suddenly calmed down. She felt as though she had been drowning but managed to splutter her way to the surface and draw some oxygen into her lungs. She felt cold and shivery, but she was quite clear now about the facts. There they all were, in black and white. Why hadn't Uncle Gasty's revealing letter been with those other two in the long envelope? Possibly because Uncle G.'s had come at a later date, after Mummy and Daddy had decided to tell him the facts and ask him to be godfather.

Mummy was not a methodical correspondent, Charlotte had heard Daddy on several occasions asking her when she was going to sort through her papers and letters. But Mummy, obsessed with her canasta parties, her bridge, her golf, all her social activities, was rarely to be seen in front of this little bureau. It was possible that the flimsy letter from Paris had been put into a pigeon-hole between some other letters (many of which Charlotte and Old Fish had picked up, after the crash), then forgotten. More than possible that she hadn't the slightest idea that such an important letter had never been sealed, with the official documents.

Charlotte felt a curious resentment against these two people who had kept the secret from her all her life. She knew that it was ungrateful—unkind—but she believed that they had done her a grievous wrong.

Suddenly she walked out of the room and up to her bedroom. On her dressing-table there stood a double frame with photographs of the two people who had adopted her.

Both photographs were signed. Mummy wore her old W.V.S. uniform and looked very straight-backed and proud. Charlotte used to admire this image of her; Mr. Harvey's photograph, too, had been taken when he was a

young Naval Lieutenant-Commander. He wasn't exactly handsome but had clean-cut features and a nice, slightly anxious smile. His was not a strong face but a mild, pleasant one. Charlotte, as she grew older, had sometimes discussed her parents with her young brother, and they had decided that Mummy was the dominant character, and Daddy rather inclined to be led by her. This fact once drew a pungent remark from Mike.

"I intend to marry a sweet little thing who'll give in to me. I'm going to be the master. Mummy's terribly nice but I don't really care for dominating women."

Charlotte now regarded the signatures.

'For Charlotte with love from her mother.'

'Daddy for his little girl.'

Charlotte's nostrils flared a little. She felt righteously indignant.

All lies. I'm not his little girl. She isn't my mother.

She flung the frame down on her bed.

Next, she picked up a framed snapshot of Michael, in white flannels, with a cricket bat between his knees. He had a thin face with high cheek-bones, very like Anthea Harvey. Everybody said he was like Mummy. He had her attractive eyes which were unusually narrow and slanted a little.

With trembling fingers, Charlotte dropped the snapshot. There seemed little doubt that *Mike* at least was a real Harvey. There couldn't be two pairs of eyes more alike. This fact made Charlotte feel slightly worse. She began to remember all kinds of episodes. Little things that had been said and done, in the past, to prove that Mummy preferred her son to her daughter. And why not? If he really *was* her son, he would naturally mean more to her than an adopted child. Perhaps Mummy had even been sorry she hadn't waited a bit longer before she

decided on the adoption. Yet the adoptive mother of that girl, Elizabeth Drew, had once remarked in Charlotte's hearing that she loved Elizabeth just as much as she could ever possibly have loved a daughter of her own.

Charlotte sat down heavily on the edge of her bed. She looked miserably around the room. It had just been done up. She had always been promised that once she came home for good she should be allowed to choose her own curtains and carpet and alter the décor. Daddy had paid the bill quite cheerfully and told her that it was her twentieth birthday present. It was lovely—deep cornflower blue carpet, blue wallpaper with huge white flowers, and a blue ceiling. Blue was Charlotte's favourite colour. The curtains, fringed with white, matched the wallpaper.

Mummy, who was very good with décor, had advised on the general scheme. They had chosen new Swedish furniture which Charlotte admired. The room looked very fresh and colourful. She couldn't accuse the parents of lacking generosity. But in a curious way it irked her now to think that she was so beholden to them. It was almost as though they had *bought* her, she thought—taken her by force out of the cradle. Stupid, illogical, unreasonable—all such thoughts were like cruel hammers pounding against her shocked mind.

"I hate them both!" She said the words aloud, through her teeth.

Then she burst into tears and cried stormily for several minutes. After that she felt better, washed her face, made up again, and brushed her long auburn hair. It fell like dark pink silk down her burning cheeks.

She began to think about her own parents while she smoked a cigarette, and stared blindly out of the window at the Square.

The clouds seemed to have drifted away. It was growing clearer, lighter, and the rain seemed to be stopping. She thought:

I must know what my mother is like. I must find her. I simply must!

She had been seventeen when Charlotte was born so she would be thirty-seven now. Younger than Mummy. Perhaps she was still unmarried, lonely and bitterly resentful at what had happened to her. Earning her own living somewhere? Charlotte would love her and help her. Or perhaps she was married and had a family and was quite happy.

Perhaps, Charlotte thought with sudden rising curiosity, *I've got some half-brothers and -sisters. I'd be interested to see them—if they exist. When my mother sees me, she'll love me, I'm sure.*

In her father she was not particularly interested. She dismissed him as having been a selfish, callous young brute who had seduced a young girl, then walked out on her and his responsibilities.

She had a sudden dramatic wish to speak to somebody —tell them what she had found out. Old Fish knew. Charlotte decided that, even so, she couldn't talk to the old woman about it.

She wished Mike was home. Young though he was, she was on good terms with him. In the holidays they used to do quite a lot together. Particularly swimming, and sailing, down in St. Nevell. The bungalow there which Daddy had christened Windhover was built on the edge of the cliffs with a marvellous view of the bay and the long line of breakers. Charlotte and Mike used to adore the surf-bathing. They belonged to the Ranelagh and, when they were in Town, played a lot of tennis; she and Mike had once won a mixed-doubles junior championship.

Whatever had happened, this wasn't poor Mike's fault, and she felt less removed in her affections from him than she did from the others. To whom could she run? She had a lot of friends but the only close one in whom she ever cared to confide was a girl named Emma Creighton, the daughter of a London doctor, who had been at school with her. Dr. and Mrs. Creighton lived only a stone's throw from there but unfortunately Emma was now in Rome studying at the British School of Art. She was a talented young painter.

Charlotte had never needed her friend more. She toyed with the mad idea of hopping into a plane and flying over to Rome just in order to talk this thing over with Emma. She was only a month older than Charlotte but somehow more worldly-wise—a grave, lovely, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl who had outgrown the family nest with a speed that had scared her rather ordinary, orthodox parents. But Dr. and Mrs. Creighton believed in giving the young complete freedom once they were over school age. Emma had been allowed to develop her considerable talent and it was over a year now since she had gone to Rome to study art, and especially portrait-painting.

The two girls wrote to each other regularly and spent quite a lot of time together when Emma came back on holiday.

Charlotte knew things about Emma that neither Dr. nor Mrs. Creighton were aware of. Emma was supposed to be sharing a flat with another English girl but she was, in fact, living with a young Italian painter. Neither of them believed in marriage. When Charlotte had met Angelo on the one occasion he had visited London he insisted on calling Emma his 'Lady Hamilton'. Charlotte had looked quite favourably upon him. He was a dedicated artist and extremely handsome and he appeared to be

madly in love with Emma. How it would all end, nobody knew. Emma didn't seem to care. Charlotte in a way envied her her courage, her progressive outlook, although she, herself, would not want to live with a man as Emma was doing.

Supposing, she asked herself this morning, Emma's illicit love-affair ended as her mother's had done—with an unwanted child?

I must tell Emma. I must tell her how wrong it all is.

Suddenly Charlotte detested the whole idea of adoption. Her own mother should of course have kept her. Perhaps she really couldn't—aged seventeen, with no job, no hope of reconciliation with her family unless she gave the baby away—how could she make anything out of her life with such a burden?

I must find my mother. Charlotte said those words again and again. Feverishly she extinguished a half-smoked cigarette. Her throat felt so dry, so hot, she didn't want to smoke any more. She wanted to get out—away from this house.

She would get hold of the fare and fly to Rome and see Emma, perhaps in a day or two's time, even if it meant her quitting her job in the shop. Her boss—Veronica Allen—was a widow and a great friend of Mummy's.

In her present state of mind, Charlotte felt an antipathy towards anybody who was a bosom friend of her adoptive mother's. And she would have no compunction in walking out on the job because she had never really felt heart and soul in it, interesting though it was. She had always felt a passionate envy of Emma who was talented and could get away from everybody and work in a glamorous city like Rome.

I must talk to someone, Charlotte thought desperately. Before the Harveys returned from Paris, she wanted

to discuss this appalling thing that she had just found out.

It was at this psychological moment that Luke Martin telephoned her.

Luke was a friend from St. Nevell and the last person she expected to hear from. She recognised his slow, low-pitched voice and gasped:

"What on earth are *you* doing here? You must be in London. You sound so close."

"I am in a call-box at Paddington Station," he said. "Just arrived."

Suddenly she felt an overwhelming relief, and pleasure at the sound of Luke's voice which she certainly had never felt in the past. Here was somebody she could trust and tell—yes, indeed.

"Oh, Luke," she exclaimed, "please get in a taxi and come here straight away; something awful has happened."

"My dear girl—what?"

"I'll tell you when you arrive."

"I was going to ask you to come out to lunch with me."

"Very well," she said in a choked voice, "I will—I'd love to get out of this house."

"You sound very tragic," he laughed.

"Where shall I meet you?" she said impatiently, not willing in her present state of mind to put up with Luke's customary light badinage which, as a rule, she enjoyed. She needed Luke, the counsellor.

He was sensitive to her mood. He said:

"Now stop worrying. I'll try and help—whatever has happened."

"Where shall I meet you? It's half-past twelve now."

"You name the place. You know I'm not one of these town-smoothies. What's your favourite eating-house?"

She thought a moment. She didn't want a very gay sort

of place. She mentioned the name of an Italian café not far from her home. *Canalettos*. The food was good. The best pasta in Town, and it was reasonable. One could always get a quiet corner table. She and Emma went there.

She gave Luke the name and address.

"They know me. You'll take longer to get from Paddington than I shall. I can walk down the Fulham Road. I'll be waiting for you."

"Right," he said and the line went dead.

Charlotte felt a little less sick and giddy than she had done since she first discovered the truth. Hastily she changed from jeans and shirt into a short blue linen dress and jacket. She tied a chiffon scarf over her auburn hair.

She let Old Fish know that she would be out to lunch and made her way to the Fulham Road.

She was deeply thankful that fate had arranged this meeting with Luke Martin. He was so rarely in London. They saw each other when the Harvey family migrated to St. Nevell. Charlotte had, in fact, been looking forward to seeing Luke at the end of this month when Mike returned from Grenoble. He certainly was the one person in the world—except Emma—in whom she could confide.

3

THE story was told.

Charlotte sat opposite Luke finishing her *fettucini*—one of the specialities at *Canalettos*—but not in the least enjoying its excellence. She usually had two helpings. This time she had had to be cajoled into eating one. Luke watched her gravely. He poured some more Chianti into her goblet.

"Have a good drink," he said.

She shook her head.

"What will you eat now?"

"Nothing."

"Now this is nonsense," said Luke. "Pull yourself together. Don't let this thing get you down."

"You talk as though it's *nothing*—why, my whole life has been turned upside-down!" she exclaimed indignantly.

He sipped his own wine, eyeing her over the rim of the glass, smiling. He had a distinctive smile. Just a crooked upward tilt of the mouth on one side, and a narrowing of his eyes. Eyes of an almost startling blue in a face deeply tanned by sun and wind and the salt of the sea. Charlotte always felt that Luke could never be anything but closely connected with the Cornish coast. He ran the Gull Rock Inn down in St. Nevell. She hardly remembered seeing him in anything but a coarse blue fisherman's jersey which he wore with shorts in the summer, heavy corduroys in the winter, and long fisherman's boots. He

was a stranger today in a town suit and tie—rather crookedly tied, in fact—the white cuffs so very white against his big walnut-brown hands. He certainly didn't belong to London. He might have tried to smooth his hair—dark, almost black—down for this visit, but it stood up—that was the way it grew—springing from a forehead curiously lined for so young a man. Handsome in the accepted sense he was not, but he gave the impression of fresh masculine good looks. His height was unusual, like the breadth of his shoulders. To Charlotte he was one hundred per cent a man, yet seemed to have an almost feminine understanding of women.

"Oh, Luke," she said in a voice that broke, "you don't understand how much this has upset me. I loved Mummy and Daddy. I can't bear to feel they don't belong to me any more."

"But, my dear girl, they do. They adopted you. You've been with them since you were three weeks old. They've given you as much of their love and attention and time as though they *were* your own parents. What the hell does it matter whether or not you are actually their progeny?"

"It does matter. It *does*."

"Only in your mind. Not in theirs. What more could they have given you, for instance, if you *had* been theirs?"

"That's not the point. And anyhow, Mummy has never understood me," Charlotte added in a petulant voice.

He shook his head disapprovingly.

"Here, have one of these —" he held an opened packet out to her. Suddenly she felt wretched. Her face began to crumple. She looked as though she was going to cry. Hastily Luke lit a match.

"Now, now, love, keep your sense of humour. Never lose that."

"I *have* lost it and anyway, I don't think there's anything funny about what has happened."

Luke leaned back and signalled to a waiter.

"I want a grilled steak," he said. "Can't I persuade you, too, Charlotte?"

"No—only coffee."

"Well, I refuse to starve," said Luke with his lopsided smile. "So, if you'll excuse me, I'll carry on eating. Mother's cooking is excellent but when I am up here on one of my rare visits I do enjoy my food."

Charlotte pulled a handkerchief from her bag and blew her nose.

"I couldn't agree more," she said with an attempt at nonchalance.

When the waiter had gone, Luke said:

"Honestly, Charlotte, it isn't such a ghastly tragedy. You had me more than a little worried when you first turned up. I thought you were going to tell me your parents had crashed coming back from Paris and that you were an orphan."

"I feel as if they *had* crashed and died," said Charlotte with that old childish desire to be melodramatic.

"Nonsense. You'd be stunned with horror. You love them."

"All right. But I don't feel the same as I did."

"Well, even if we cut out your handsome Mama who doesn't always see eye to eye with you, what about your handsome Papa? You've always thought him a marvel."

"I still think he's marvellous, but they've both done me a great wrong. They should have told me I was adopted. It's all the lies and the deceit and the shock that have got me down."

Luke had to agree with that. He had never given a lot of thought to the matter of adoption but he was inclined

to believe that it was essential for a child to know right from the start about its true parentage. Poor little Charlotte! As she said she was quite obviously suffering from shock.

Suddenly he reached out a hand. She placed hers in it and he gave her fingers a strong, friendly squeeze.

"I'm awfully sorry, love, really I am," he said.

She smoked her cigarette, blinking fiercely to keep the tears from overflowing.

It was a godsend that Luke should have arrived today at this psychological moment in her life. He was her greatest friend, her only boy-friend, although he was twelve years older than herself, and there had never been any question of love or sex between them. He was just a man whom she admired and trusted and could talk to.

He and his mother had bought the Gull Rock Inn three years ago following the death of the old Cornishman who had been there as long as most of them could remember.

The inn was a long low grey-stone building standing at right-angles to the sea up a little rough road that led from the beach. Luke and his mother had modernised the interior without spoiling its old-world charm. Tourists could get fresh lobsters or crab-sandwiches there with their drinks or coffees. Luke did a roaring trade. Otherwise there was only a post office which was also a sweet shop, and general stores.

Charlotte well remembered the arrival of the Martins during one of her family's summers down there. To begin with the villagers, most of them fishermen, and their families, had resented the newcomer. He was not a Cornishman. The Cornish do not take kindly to strangers. They are a proud, reserved people. Luke was educated—he had an educated voice. He had been to a public school;

he came originally from Worcestershire and at one time was a pilot in civil aviation.

A bad bout of rheumatic fever, from which he had now almost recovered, had left him with a delicacy that put an end to his career. Fortunately for him he had had a little capital. Not enough to make a living—especially for a married man—but sufficient to take possession of the Cornish inn.

Just before his illness he had married. Tragedy followed. After a year of happiness Bridget, his pretty Irish wife, was killed in a car crash and with her died their infant son of two months old, along with the friend who had been driving them.

Then had followed Luke's long illness.

The story of his double tragedy soon got around and softened the hearts of the inhabitants of St. Nevell towards him. That and the fact that Mr. Luke, as they now called him, proved to be a good fellow; no 'side' to him. He was ready to listen to everybody's troubles. The little saloon bar in the inn rapidly became more popular than it used to be even in the days of old Reuben Polderry.

Then there was his mother, Ann Martin, not yet sixty and a tireless worker. She ran the domestic side of the inn where they put two or three people up during the summer holidays. She was also an excellent cook. She never complained although at one time, when her husband, Colonel Martin, was alive, she had had her own big house and staff in Worcestershire.

It soon became evident to everybody that she adored her son and couldn't do enough to help him forget his sorrow. It wasn't long before the Martins were making a profit and doing as well as could be expected with such a small pub. Added to this, the bracing Cornish air and life

at little St. Nevell—still so unspoiled by the change of time—seemed to have cured Luke of all his ills.

Just before Charlotte's seventeenth birthday, when the Harveys were on holiday in St. Nevell, Luke and Charlotte had a momentous introduction.

She was a strong swimmer but the currents are treacherous on that coast and she had swum out too far. Michael was not with her as he usually was. Her shouts for help had been heard only by the newly arrived publican. He threw off his coat and swam after her. As he had pulled her into safety, Charlotte remembered how his mother had rushed down to the water's edge with a panic-stricken face, and all her concern had been for him, not for the half-conscious girl. Such exertion is not good for a man recovering from rheumatic fever, and Mrs. Martin knew it. She hadn't been very sympathetic with Charlotte for taking such a risk.

At the time, Charlotte resented what she thought to be Ann Martin's rudeness. She had disliked the small grey-haired determined woman who had none of her son's charm of manner. But once Charlotte knew the whole story, she soon began to feel less antagonistic towards his anxious mother, and was now on good terms with her.

Gradually all the Harveys became friendly with the Martins. Charlotte's family went in to the Gull Rock Inn for their evening drink, and a gossip with whoever else might be there.

John Harvey had always been particularly popular with the local inhabitants of St. Nevell because he was once in the Navy, loved the sea and fished for bass off the rocks when he was down there, with a skill that won him approbation from one and all.

Luke, having started off by saving Charlotte from drowning, later saved her from another kind of drowning

—in the deep waters of her own emotions. There was always some occasion when she got herself into a state over something. She was inclined, during those keenly-felt adolescent years, to over-dramatise herself. Times when they were temperamental clashes between herself and her mother, and when, strangely enough, only Luke seemed able to smooth out the creases.

Charlotte found him a good tolerant listener, and an intelligent counsellor. Mummy, on the other hand, preached—rather weakly supported by Daddy. Charlotte hated this. Mike was too young to be helpful and scoffed on the occasions when family rows reduced Charlotte to tears.

In London, as at school, of course, there had been Emma. But in Cornwall, Charlotte ran to Luke. She frequently sat there on the stool in the little bar, when it was still shut to customers, and poured out her grievances. Luke leaned his arms on the counter and listened.

He was a man of strong character. But he could be extraordinarily gentle. Odd, perhaps, for a man who might have been more of a tough guy after years as a pilot. But if anything, the long hours of flying in the past had sharpened his powers of perception—made him more sensitive. What he had suffered over the loss of his wife and baby, and during the long months of his illness, had also made him particularly sympathetic towards the sufferings of others. Not that Charlotte ever imagined her spiritual growing-pains to be comparable with Luke's great grief.

She looked at him now with a growing sense of gratitude for the help and strength he had so often given her.

There was that affair over the artist who had been on holiday in St. Nevell last summer. She had flown to Luke in a fury of rage and indignation because of what

happened with Julian. He was not as old as Luke—but older than the nineteen-year-old Charlotte. Right from the start he had made flagrant love to her. He told her that he was crazy about her long, graceful, sun-browned limbs, the delicate curve of her big coral-tinted mouth, and her long silky auburn hair.

'My sea-nymph', he used to call her.

He had been the first man ever to kiss her sensually. When she felt the tip of his tongue in her mouth she had been half revolted, half excited and finally scared. But he was a sophisticated and interesting man and held her interest. She went to the bungalow he had rented and posed for him quite happily until the day he had told her he wanted to paint her in the nude. Then she had flatly refused to take off all her clothes. They had had a scene in which Julian used all his powers of seduction to try and make her change her mind. It was the first time she fully realised that friendship between men and women couldn't always mean just a casual holding of hands or kissing.

It was not that she was ignorant about sex. She and Emma had discussed most things. But she just hadn't realised, until Julian opened her eyes, the full potency of her own attractions. It had thoroughly disturbed her when Julian turned nasty and called her a 'teaser' and a 'sexy little devil who hadn't the courage to strip'—then told her to go to hell.

So she had fled to Luke. She wouldn't have dared tell her parents about it but with Luke she never worried. He was, as even her parents admitted, the nicest of men. She could tell him anything.

Hot and flushed, she had repeated all the names that Julian had called her.

"Am I smug and suburban and a prude? He said I had a prurient mind, too, because I saw evil in nakedness. Oh,

Luke, I used to think him so wonderful. It's been such a shock!" she had cried.

Luke smiled and said:

"My poor little smug, respectable Charlotte."

"Oh, don't laugh at me!" She had burst into tears.

He had given her a Coca-Cola, a handkerchief for her tears and told her exactly what he thought of Julian.

"It isn't that he behaved in a particularly criminal manner. You're not under age, love, and you're supposed to know your way around. Most girls do. It's just his colossal conceit I dislike, and the fact that he's a rotten psychologist. He didn't understand your essential decency —or respect it. But I don't suppose it's done you any harm."

"But do you think I *ought* to have agreed to pose in the nude?"

"No, I don't."

And she had seen a slow red stain Luke's brown cheeks.

"I think every human being has a right to the privacy of his own body," he added. "There's some like to uncover their limbs—God knows there are plenty of them down here on the beach in the summer—but there are some that don't, and why should they?"

"Well, *I* don't!" she said hotly and sipped her Coca-Cola and calmed down. Luke always seemed able to put things right for her.

She never saw Julian again.

Today, she watched Luke enjoy his steak and tried to drag herself out of the slough of egotistical misery that she had wallowed in since reading those letters. Luke didn't in fact make her feel she was any different from the Charlotte she used to be. She admitted that. He seemed unaffected by the revelation of her true birth. She managed to turn her thoughts to him now and ask a few

desultory questions about St. Nevell and the inn, and to enquire after the health of Mrs. Martin, and their mutual friends. Then she asked Luke why he was up here.

"Necessity, in a sort of way," he said. "As a matter of fact—I don't suppose I've ever told you—Bridget—my wife—had no parents, but was brought up by an aunt and uncle in Dublin. They're both over seventy, not keen on travelling, but they've suddenly decided to fly over to London to see me. To save them the journey, I'm meeting them here. They arrive later today. I shall go back to St. Nevell tomorrow, night train. Mother is coping for me until I get back. But as you know—we are very busy in the bar at this time of the year."

Charlotte removed her thoughts entirely from her own trouble. It was the first time Luke had ever spoken to her of his dead wife. She said, with sympathy:

"It will be rather a gloomy business for you, I expect."

She watched the movement in the muscles of his cheeks but his bright blue eyes stayed as cool, as remote, as ever. One never knew what Luke Martin was thinking about or feeling. He was very self-sufficient.

He said:

"Oh, that's all old history. The sort of intense feeling that both Bridget's people and I felt when she died, couldn't last. It's all years ago now, anyhow. When the accident happened, I was still flying for a private charter line, and we had a little house in Twickenham. Bridget and the boy are buried there. Whatever I felt about her and the poor infant I am not a morbid fellow. I only go to the cemetery once a year to make sure their grave is in order. But I've got to take the old aunt and uncle along tomorrow. They want to see it and I don't suppose that will be a very bright occasion."

"I'm sorry, Luke. You —"

He put his finger to his lips, still smiling.

"Thanks, love, no sympathy! It was all over a long time ago and, as I say, I don't hold with being morbid—dwelling on what's past. One should be more concerned with the future."

"You're so strong," she sighed. "I wish I had some of your strength."

"You've plenty. Just prepare a big welcome home for your parents—forget that they *aren't*—just remember that they adopted you and legally gave you your name, and be nice to them. It'll all fall into place! You'll see."

But suddenly Charlotte grew cold, and withdrew even from Luke's friendly counsel.

"I've made up my mind what I'm going to do," she said. "I shall see Mummy and Daddy and talk to them and ask them to give me more details. But I intend to look for my own mother. Yes—I shall look, till I find her. Nothing will make me change my mind."

4

It had always been obvious to Luke that Charlotte was a young girl of strong will, despite her deceptively fragile appearance. She was like many people—a dual character. One side was tender and sweet, with all the charm of unawakened womanhood, the other a rather argumentative determined girl. Luke understood her. He understood most people and he had long since made up his mind that the young girls of today appear to be sophisticated and hard ('Know-alls' as his critical mother called them), but still he admired them. They had courage and a right to their own points of view. Only he refused to believe that there wasn't always that other, hidden side—with the essential virgin predominant—the scared child—just as Charlotte appeared today. He believed that touch of bravado in her was a veneer and that under it lay the little teenager who had rushed to him with her troubles down in Cornwall.

She had interested Luke from the time he had first met her and rescued her from the sea, three years ago. He had grown attached to her in the elder-brother sense. He had never actually found very young girls sexually attractive. Bridget was twenty-four when he married her. The only other love in his life had been a woman older than himself, living apart from her husband.

When he first met Charlotte, he was still encased in the wall he had built around himself on the day he buried his wife and infant son. He had never fully recovered from

the wounds of that disaster, no matter what face he presented to the world.

It was good that he had a mother for whom he cared deeply and who could give him the affection and care he needed—particularly during his long illness.

To him, Ann Martin was a marvellous woman and a good companion. They were quite happy together, running their little Cornish pub.

At one time obsessed with the sky, Luke had now become equally engrossed with the sea. He was a keen fisherman in his spare time, and in the evenings fond of reading after the inn closed. He had no intention of marrying again. He could be gay, when required, with any woman who wanted a flirtation. But it would have to be a light, frothy affair—nothing deeper or more serious. And only once had he ever looked at Charlotte Harvey as a man looks at a desirable female. That was when she had asked him that day whether he thought her a prude because she refused to strip for her painter friend, Julian.

Then and then only, Luke had suddenly wakened up to the desirability of the young, lovely girl with her strong yet slender limbs, her exquisite skin and those large melting eyes. But he had speedily put that instant of sensuous delight out of his mind and never allowed it to revive. He had the greatest respect for Charlotte and her parents. He wanted to go on being Charlotte's friend.

Today, when he heard what she had to say, he was as angry with her as any practical brother might have been.

"You're nuts, love," he said shortly. "You can't want to go hunting for your own mother like that. It's not only a ridiculous idea but a dangerous one."

Back went the auburn head. The luminous eyes flashed at him.

"Why?"

"When your people adopted you, the Courts handed you over legally and it was agreed that your own mother should never see you again. If you try and break that down, I reckon you'll not only upset Mr. and Mrs. Harvey pretty badly, but you might find you hate the sight of your real mother if you do find her. That would be very disappointing and you'd be worse off than you are now!"

"I don't believe I would hate my own mother. I feel a terrific urge to contact her," said Charlotte stubbornly.

Luke scowled.

"Natural, I suppose, but surely you can see it's tricky. She mightn't want to see *you*."

"Well, I think she would," Charlotte said.

"My dear, she handed you over the moment you were born. Why invest her now with all kinds of maternal qualities she probably doesn't possess?"

"I don't for a moment believe she handed me over willingly. She was forced into it. They made her have me adopted, otherwise they wouldn't take her back—her people. She was only seventeen, remember. I pity her."

"Look, love," said Luke, leaning forward and gazing at her seriously. "You're starting to be very sorry for somebody about whom you know absolutely nothing. Please don't idealise her."

"You can argue both ways, Luke. She might turn out to be the sweetest, most marvellous person in the world and all these years, I shall have missed her—my own real mother."

Luke pulled a face.

"Sweet Charlotte, if I wasn't a gentleman I would utter a word unfit for your little ears. Instead I'll merely say

tripe! *Absolute tripe!* You haven't missed your mother's love at all. You were perfectly satisfied with Mrs. Harvey until this morning."

"I don't know that I was. *You* know better than anybody how often we clashed."

"Oh, come off it! All mothers and daughters clash at times. You'd certainly have clashed with your own Mama. Much as I love mine, I fight with her on occasions. No two strong-minded people living together can agree all the time."

"Oh, Luke, you're against me!"

His expression softened.

"No, I'm not, love. I just want you to be rational. Don't fly off the handle just because you're shocked and upset over this thing. If you go in search of your own mother, it'll be rather insulting to Mrs. Harvey, won't it? You'll make it plain that you're not content with her."

The blood crept up under Charlotte's transparent skin in a way that always fascinated men, and Luke was no exception. She really looked very attractive when she blushed, he thought mildly.

"That may be. And it may be very horrid and selfish of me," she said. "But I have a terrible desire to see my own mother and if I can possibly find her, I shall."

"For God's sake, *how?* You were born twenty years ago. You don't know where she lived then or anything much about her, do you?"

"I know enough. I can have her traced."

"My, *my*!" exclaimed Luke, shaking his head. "You *are* all upside-down. I really believe you mean to do this."

"Yes, I do."

"And how do you propose to carry out the search?"

"Well, I know several things about her—such as her

name. It was Sophie Nagorski. My father was a student farmer working on this farm where my mother was staying at the time. *Her* mother, my grandmother, was Polish, like my grandfather, who was an architect."

"Polish blood, eh? That accounts for your temperament."

She was too engrossed in her own thoughts to hear what he said.

"There can't be many Nagorskis who were architects and married to Polish wives," she went on. "That's a distinctive factor. I must try to trace my grandparents—then find out from them about my mother. They may not be dead yet. I was born when my mother was very young. Do you know I was called Sophie, too?" Charlotte gave a slightly hysterical laugh . . . "Yes, that was my name—Sophie Nagorski—only it was legally changed."

"Okay—I don't like it, I prefer Charlotte Harvey," said Luke shortly.

Charlotte ignored this, too, and continued:

"I also know that I was born in a nursing home in Barnet, so providing they still have records there of the births of twenty years ago, I could get some information from them."

"Nobody will tell you anything. They don't, in these cases. It won't be any good going to the Adoption Home, either. Those people guarantee not to give away the real mother's identity."

"How do you know so much about it, Luke?"

"Because, funnily enough, I was reading a case rather like yours in reverse only the other day; in our local rag. A Cornish couple adopted a child and the mother wanted it back, but the time had expired and the authorities

refused to disclose the child's whereabouts. It cuts both ways, you see."

Charlotte stubbed her cigarette-end on an ash-tray.

"I refuse to be put off. I shall go to a detective agency and get them to work for and with me."

Now Luke's eyes opened wide.

"My *dear* girl, you're setting yourself a gigantic task and a very expensive one. Who's going to pay for all this?"

"I don't suppose you know," said Charlotte, "but I'm twenty next week and I then come into half my grandmother's money. In her Will she left me £5,000—half to come to me this year—and the rest when I come of age. I suppose I still have a right to accept it. She was devoted to me, although I know now I'm not really her granddaughter, which incidentally is another blow. I adored her. I could borrow on her money, anyhow."

"Are you really twenty so soon? You still seem a teenager to me." Luke tried to get a smile out of her, but failed.

"Well, I feel frightfully old," she said and suddenly swallowed a sob.

Luke twisted his lips.

"Carry on like this, love, and you'll soon look a hag," he said cheerfully.

Her wonderful wide eyes flashed at him. "I don't believe you're really sympathetic at all."

"Yes, I am, love, but I don't want you to go all cuckoo about this adoption business. Do pipe down and wait and see what your parents have to say to you."

"I'll have to do that. They come back this afternoon."

"Well, give them a break."

"Do you think they gave me one?" asked Charlotte bitterly.

"I know you are upset," he said, "and that the whole thing has been a shock but you can't wipe out twenty years of devotion. It's your own parents you ought to be cross with, if you must be cross with anyone. Mr. and Mrs. Harvey did their best for you. Your own father walked out on you and —"

"Well, my own mother didn't," broke in Charlotte, with a mulish tilt to her pretty chin. "She was forced into it—I keep telling you. Anyhow, don't try and dissuade me, Luke, because I've made up my mind. I shall borrow on my money which I'm coming into next week and start searching for my mother at once."

Luke sighed, leant back in his chair and signalled to the waiter for the bill.

"I never argue with women who've made up their minds to do something," he said with a twisted smile. "Besides, I must be on my way."

Charlotte's heart sank. She looked at Luke's brown, wind-weathered face with its fine bones and dogged look of endurance and decided, not for the first time, that she was deeply attached to this man.

"Don't be angry with me," she pleaded.

If Luke had been anywhere near to anger, it would have evaporated at the sight of those swimming eyes.

"It's not my business, love—suit yourself what you do, and I assure you that I feel very sorry for you indeed. I can imagine how upset you are but I just feel, also, that you're making too much of it."

"Is it unnatural for me to want to see my own mother?"

Luke rubbed the back of his head.

"I suppose not. I was lucky. As you know, my mother and I are close friends and get on like a house on fire."

"Well, supposing you found out that she *wasn't* your mother?"

"I don't think I'd feel differently towards her—perhaps even more grateful."

"Men are different," said Charlotte sullenly. "They're not as romantic or family-minded as women. Besides, your mother worships you, but mine—well, if she worships anybody it's Mike, and I now firmly believe Mike is her own son. But that I've still got to find out."

Once more Luke's incurable sense of humour asserted itself. He smiled at her, one eye half shut.

"Do I detect a touch of the green-eyed monster, jealousy?"

"Oh, I hate you," said Charlotte, and suddenly laughed with him. But she was now no longer laughing as they walked out of the restaurant.

The rain-clouds had moved away. There was no sun but it was warmer, muggy, grey. Charlotte felt heavy-hearted. She said:

"I'm going through with my search, Luke. There's something in me which *wants* to, madly. Only please, *please* go on being my friend."

He tucked an arm around hers and pressed it to his side.

"You know I will. If you must be crazy, okay. And I do think it's a bit cracked of you, love, to try and dig up the past like this. And, as I've already mentioned, I think it'll hurt your parents. But *if* you do it, I'll help all I can."

"Will you?" Charlotte looked up at him eagerly, her spirits rising. There was nothing she wanted more than to have Luke as an ally—dear, practical, friendly Luke. "But how? You live so far away."

"I can always nip up to London if you really need me.

Matter of fact, I can fly from Mawgan, as you know, and be with you in a couple of hours."

Charlotte stopped dead. This time she looked at him with something like amazement. "Would you really go to all that trouble for me?"

"Of course."

"But why —" she began and stopped, suddenly embarrassed.

Perhaps it was at that moment that Luke Martin felt the first faint stirring of his heart—something more urgent, more disturbing than mere platonic affection for this young girl who, although so nearly of age, usually seemed so young to him. Dedicated though he was to his work, faithful though he had been to that brief love of the past, he, himself, was still young; a vigorous man with a deep interest in life, in human beings, in the changing world. From the very start he had felt more than an ordinary interest in this girl. He had become an accepted friend of her family. He liked the boy, Mike, too. He was a good lad and shaping splendidly.

But Charlotte . . .

Suddenly, abruptly, he took his arm away from hers and almost guiltily suffocated that fleeting moment of physical passion which had unexpectedly flamed through him.

Watch it, Luke, he thought, *you're twelve years older than Charlotte. Besides—she isn't in the least interested in you that way.*

He answered her question casually.

"Because I'm a real friend, love. I'll do what I can. Just keep me posted, wherever you go and whatever you do."

"Oh!" she breathed. "That's marvellous. Thanks awfully, darling Luke."

But after she had left him and let herself into the house, she no longer thought of Luke.

Once more her whole mind and heart were absorbed in the exciting possibility that she might, with the help of her inheritance and her own determination, trace that young girl who had given birth to her, twenty years ago.

5

"THIS," said Anthea Harvey, "is dreadful!"

She sat in the beautiful green and gold drawing-room, her fingers locked agitatedly in her lap—and it took a lot to agitate Anthea—and stared up at her adopted daughter. Charlotte stood there, head flung back, eyes accusing. Mrs. Harvey realised that for the first time for many long years, she was being forced to realise that Charlotte was *not* her own child.

John Harvey sat beside her. Like many a man, he had taken refuge in a pipe. When he had first walked into the house, back from the successful business trip to Paris, he had looked well and cheerful, a man with few cares in the world, wholly interested in the welfare of his family and his business and, as he humorously put it, the almost inhuman worry of meeting modern taxation. But now he looked a worried, puzzled man. He could not meet the accusation in Charlotte's eyes. He was not as courageous as his wife, he decided, about facing up to unpleasant facts. But then, Anthea had always been stronger-minded than he was. *Too* strong at times, perhaps.

The last thing in the world John Harvey had expected was to get home—and he had been looking forward to it in spite of all the lures of Paris—and find that such a bombshell had burst while they were away. Before he could even unpack his suitcase and bring out the bottle of perfume which he had bought for Charlotte, she had

insisted on both of them sitting down in here, and hearing what she had to say. He had been deeply shocked and he was sure that Anthea was. But because he was a nice person, he had not once said: *'I told you so'* to his wife, when Charlotte rebuked them for keeping secret the fact that she was adopted.

Many a time during the past years John Harvey had thought it wrong. In the early days he had tried hard to persuade his wife to tell the truth to the little girl. But Anthea had stuck to her plan of concealing it, not only from Charlotte, but from the world. She insisted on carrying on with the pretence, letting everybody think she was actually Charlotte's mother.

John raised his head—looked first at the discoloration on the wall where the mirror had hung, then at the smashed satinwood bureau, then at his daughter. (He would always think of her as that. He adored her.) He said:

"Look, darling. You haven't spared us. You've told us exactly how you feel about this thing and I don't think we would be justified in saying you have no right to feel it. But I do wish you would get it into your head that we love you just as much as though you *had* been ours, and we always will."

"You should have told me, Daddy."

John Harvey bowed his head.

"As things have turned out, I agree."

"Well, I don't," Anthea Harvey broke in, "I had a perfect right to do what I did."

Charlotte stared at her incredulously.

"You can't mean that. You must see how wrong it was."

"Why?"

"I think perhaps Charl is justified," muttered Mr.

Harvey but his wife took no notice. She argued fiercely in defence of her own actions.

If there was one thing Anthea hated it was to be put in the wrong. For some time now—a year or more—since Charlotte had grown more mature, there had been a slight coolness between them. Nothing had ever really been said. On the surface they had remained as affectionate and friendly as ever except for the odd argument. But Anthea, who always liked her own way in everything, had begun to resent, very faintly, the fact that Charlotte argued and had a mind of her own and was so different from herself. Charlotte had always been too imaginative in Anthea's opinion. As for her emotional make-up, that was something the older woman could never understand, because she, as a character, was practical and unsentimental. Now that the truth was out, the gulf between herself and her adopted daughter seemed to widen in an alarming way. At the moment she was not prepared to admit it, but she was hurt, deeply hurt, because Charlotte had 'turned on her'. In her own way she truly loved her so-called daughter. She repeated her question:

"Why was it so wrong? I longed to have a little girl of my own—I couldn't have one, so we adopted you. I wanted to feel that you were my own baby, and wanted *you* to feel I was your real mother. Was that a crime?"

"Exactly," Mr. Harvey hastily upheld his wife. "Your mother has been wonderful to you, Charlotte darling. You have nothing to reproach her with."

It was on the tip of Charlotte's tongue to cry out: *"But she isn't my mother"*, but she refrained. Furiously resentful though she felt, she could not in all honesty wipe out those twenty years of devotion. On a less belligerent note she said:

"Oh, I know, Daddy, and I'm grateful for what you've

both done for me. Of *course* I am. You've given me a lovely home, all I've needed, a good education and . . . and everything," she finished rather lamely.

"Then I don't see why you are being so antagonistic towards us," said Mrs. Harvey and stood up and walked to the window.

She wasn't going to let either her husband or Charlotte see the sudden tears in her eyes. She refused to allow this thing to get her down. Nothing was supposed to get Anthea Harvey down. It was her boast that she could cope with any situation. She despised the sort of woman who went to pieces in a crisis or was easily moved to tears.

But in this crucial hour she regretted with all her heart having kept Gaston's letter, and those documents referring to the baby's origin.

Why had she kept them? She remembered John asking years ago, when Charlotte was still a baby, if it wouldn't be better to destroy them. She had meant to. Somehow or other she had always put it off. She had thought the letters firmly sealed and locked away in her private bureau. Perhaps she had thought, too, that it might be only right if, after her death—and John's—Charlotte should learn the truth about her birth. Whatever it was, it was all so long ago now, she had practically forgotten the fact that Charlotte was *not* her child. Not for years had she given a thought to those tell-tale papers. Now she could see how foolish and misguided she had been. But she was certainly not going to let Charlotte bring her to her knees. Yet, in a queer way, she felt terrified in case she had lost Charlotte's love and respect for ever.

Charlotte had finished with recriminations. She was quite satisfied that she had driven home the fact that all the lies and deception had been wickedly wrong. Now she wanted to get down to details of her origin.

"Don't let's say any more about whether you did the right thing or not, Mummy," she said. "We'll never agree about that. But I'll calm down and admit that you've been marvellous to me. So has Daddy. It's just that the whole thing has been a frightful shock. The least you can do now is to tell me as much as you can about my own parents."

The tears dried on Anthea Harvey's lashes. She turned and faced the young girl proudly.

"Well, I'm glad you don't intend to go on being so unfriendly," she said with a short laugh. "And it's nice of you to go on calling me 'Mummy' if you hate me so much."

"I don't hate you!" Charlotte exclaimed, her face crimson.

Mr. Harvey stood up, his nice, long, amiable face creased with distress.

"Come, come, you two. Don't lose all sense of proportion. Nobody hates anybody. I'm quite sure Charlotte still loves us, Anthea. It is, as she says, the shock that has made her say all these bitter things."

Charlotte faced both of these people whom she had, until this morning, looked upon as her parents. Her eyes were slightly ashamed.

"I shall always be grateful—and very fond of you," she stammered.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Harvey with a touch of sarcasm which was, however, lost on Charlotte who was anxious to delve into the past.

"Do let's all sit down again, Mummy," she said. "Please both of you tell me everything you *do* know. I think I have a right to hear."

"Er—yes, er—of course," stuttered Mr. Harvey and returned to his sofa and his pipe. He had never in his life

been so embarrassed or unhappy. With all his heart he wished this thing had never happened. Damn that ruddy mirror! Who would have expected it to break and smash Anthea's bureau? And why the hell hadn't she deposited those papers in the bank if she wanted to keep them? Her greatest fault was her casual conduct over papers and bills. For a woman who was so capable, so clever in so many ways, it seemed astonishing that she could have that disorganised, unmethodical streak.

Anthea remained standing.

"I don't see what useful purpose can be served by dragging up the past," she said in a low voice.

"But I want to know about my own parents," argued Charlotte.

"I think it's rather unkind and ungrateful of you, then," said Mrs. Harvey, thereby proving that Luke had been right when he had warned Charlotte that she was going to hurt her adoptive parents badly.

"I don't mean to be unkind or ungrateful," she said miserably. "I'm sorry if I rather blew my top and was nasty just now."

"We understand, darling," said Mr. Harvey gently.

"Oh, yes—obviously *we* are to blame," said Anthea Harvey, biting her lip.

But she spoke with less warmth and sympathy than her husband. Charlotte, young and inexperienced though she was, could not be blind to the fact that her adoptive mother was first and foremost an egotist—more distressed, perhaps, because she had been found out, than over her daughter's state of mind. But strangely enough, Charlotte did not hold this against Anthea. She, herself, was an egotist and knew it. She had a strong sense of justice. Everybody had a right to their own feelings. Mummy had done what she thought best, twenty years ago. Okay—let

it rest at that. But she wasn't going to revoke her decision to search for her own mother.

"I hope you will both try to understand that I intend to trace my mother," she said.

Mr. Harvey looked paralysed. Anthea Harvey gasped.

"You must be mad."

"Why? Isn't it natural for a girl to want to see her own mother?"

For once Anthea Harvey felt at a loss for words.

She stammered:

"B–but you c–can't mean it. I've been your m–mother ever since you were three weeks old. W–why should you want to f–find the *other* one?"

Charlotte turned her back and stood for a moment with her hands locked together behind her back.

"I don't know," she said in a choked voice, "I just do."

Anthea turned to her husband. In all their life together John had never seen his wife look so helpless—or so upset. Anthea was usually cool and imperturbable. In fact, he used to think that only *she* could have carried off this deception about Charlotte's birth, and got away with it.

She looked very tired just now. Older, suddenly. Yet still so slim and good looking, he thought fondly, with her pale skin, her bright blue, rather slanting eyes, and that lovely auburn hair which was exactly the same colour as Charlotte's. Whereas Charlotte's floated to her shoulders, Anthea's was cut fashionably short, brushed back from her forehead, curving along either cheek. John could see her lips trembling. He was full of love for her—and pity. Of course he pitied Charlotte, too, but even more was he sorry for his wife. Her secure little world was cracking around her.

"Don't worry, dear," he said, holding out a hand. "This

won't come to anything. It's just Charlotte's first reaction to the whole unfortunate thing."

Charlotte swung round, her eyes big and gleaming.

"I give you my word I do intend to find my real mother, Daddy. I *want* to. It's something quite different. I mean what I feel now about my own mother—it's *different*."

Anthea winced. She took a cigarette from a box on the table, lit it and gave a brief laugh.

"My dear child, how in God's name can you feel any affection for a girl who handed you over to the Martlett Adoption Society as soon as you were born, and did not exercise her right to get you back."

"Her parents made it impossible for her," muttered Charlotte.

"Oh, Charlotte, none of us really knows a thing about it."

Charlotte said:

"I want to find out."

"I don't begin to understand you." Mrs. Harvey's voice was not as sure or cool as usual. Charlotte felt a rush of remorseful feeling and the desire to get back on more friendly terms with this woman whom she had always thought of as her mother. She went up to her and grabbed one of her hands.

"Oh, Mummy," she said, "don't be upset with me. I dare say some girls in my position might have said they disliked the very thought of their own mother in these circumstances but I'm different. I feel a sort of *tie* with her. I feel I can never rest, knowing she is in this world, until I've contacted her."

Mrs. Harvey was dangerously near to tears again but she controlled herself admirably. She put an arm around Charlotte.

"Darling, this is getting out of all proportion. Do let's

be practical. Your—mother may be dead. We wouldn't have heard."

"Okay—I'd like to find out," said Charlotte stubbornly.

Mrs. Harvey removed her arm.

"I'm sorry you haven't found me—or Daddy—enough for you."

"Oh, you have been—I mean you've both been marvellous." Charlotte felt the need to make amends for her early anger. "And I'll try to understand why you wanted everyone to think I was your own baby. But it wasn't really fair on me. It would have been better if you'd treated me as Mrs. Drew treated Elizabeth."

"Perhaps I should have done," said Mrs. Harvey. "I'm beginning to realise that now." And she sat down on the sofa beside her husband, huddled forward a little, smoking furiously.

"Well, thinking about Elizabeth Drew, *she* has no wish to look for her own parents, has she?" said Mr. Harvey with a slightly beseeching look at Charlotte.

"No, because she's grown up knowing about it all. She's used to the idea and perhaps she feels differently about it."

"She's genuinely fond of her adoptive mother—that's the real explanation," broke out Anthea, raw with hurt pride.

Immediately Charlotte, who was essentially kind, sat on the arm of the sofa and put a hand on the older woman's shoulder.

"Mummy, I'm genuinely fond of you, too. You know that."

"Then why look for this . . . other woman?"

"Please try to understand," said Charlotte in an agonised voice. "Please do. I can't help it."

"Be sensible, Charlotte. You'll never find her."

"Never," seconded Mr. Harvey. "You're on a hopeless wicket, darling. The Adoption Home won't give you any information. It's against the law. Anyhow, the story is twenty years old. God knows where your—er—real mother is today, even (as Mummy says) if she's still alive."

"I've got to find out," muttered Charlotte.

"So you're going to make things horribly awkward and distressing for us and let everybody know that you're not my baby?" came from Mrs. Harvey in a choked voice.

"No, Mummy. Not if you still want that to be kept a secret. I'll never say anything to anyone. You've done a lot for me and I'll try to show my thanks by not giving you away. Outsiders need not know the truth, even if I eventually find my mother."

A little colour came into Anthea Harvey's cheeks.

"Thank you," she said in a choked voice.

"What about Mike?" Suddenly Mr. Harvey asked the question.

The three of them stared at each other. Nobody had so far mentioned Mike. They had all been so busy discussing Charlotte.

"I wouldn't like him to know either," exclaimed Mrs. Harvey. "He's so fond of Charlotte. He has grown up to believe she is his sister. It would be a blow to him to discover she was not."

Charlotte slid off the arm of the sofa and delving into the cigarette-box, found a cigarette and lit it for herself. Her fingers were trembling with agitation. Her whole body felt damp and sticky. She felt a little sick, too. She said:

"That's something I want to know. Is Mike adopted too?"

Mrs. Harvey exchanged glances with her husband, then said with a sigh:

"No. The odd thing is that eleven months after we adopted you, I realised I was going to have a child of my own. Mike is . . . is our own son, Charlotte."

"But you have always been as dear to us and there has never been any question of a difference in how we've felt towards you two children," put in Mr. Harvey.

"That's true," Anthea nodded and sighed heavily.

Charlotte said nothing. So many things that had happened in the past made her feel now that Mummy did, in fact, favour her *own* child. But Charlotte had no desire to make further trouble, or cause more bitterness. She was beginning to feel less resentful about her adoption. She was fast passing out of a state of shock into the calmer waters of reason. She just knew that she still wanted urgently to look for the girl who had given birth to her nearly twenty years ago. She said:

"I'm glad you had a son of your own, Mummy. That must have been a great joy to you."

"It often happens," put in Mr. Harvey with a cough, "that a woman has a child of her own after an adoption. It isn't uncommon, you know."

"Well, I won't say anything to Mike if you don't want me to," came from Charlotte.

Mrs. Harvey shut her eyes and extinguished her cigarette. She muttered:

"John, for heaven's sake go and get me a stiff drink. Gin and tonic. I've never needed one more."

"Yes, of course, dear," he said and hurried to the corner cupboard.

"You've kept the secret very well," said Charlotte, and laughed without humour.

Mrs. Harvey's feeling of irritation returned.

"Don't condemn us too harshly. We've all done our best for you, Charlotte."

"I know, Mummy, and as I've just told you, I'm sorry I was so angry and upset to begin with."

"Then please, darling, let it all drop now. *Please* don't carry out this ridiculous idea of trying to trace your mother. It'll only hurt us all. Anyhow you'll be disappointed. You'll never find her."

"Oh, Mummy, I *must*. Mind you, I've no particular interest in my *father*. He behaved jolly badly. But I think my poor little mother was seduced and forced to give me up and she might like to see me."

"Oh God," said Anthea Harvey between her teeth and thought, *If ever a woman has paid for her pride and lies and deception, I have. This is really grim.*

She was positively startled by the immense and intense interest that Charlotte had developed in her parentage. She was horrified too by the risk of gossip. Although Charlotte had agreed to keep the facts from the outside world, there was no knowing what might happen once she began this mad quest.

Curiously enough, Charlotte read the older woman's thoughts.

"I know you're worrying about what everyone will say. But I promise you it won't get around through me. I can carry out my search quite privately, and keep it a dead secret. Nobody will ever know."

Suddenly, guiltily, she remembered she had poured the whole story out to Luke. She made a mental note that she must ring him once he got back to St. Nevell and tell him never to let on that she had confided in him. Not that she had any reason to believe he would repeat a word of her story, even to his own mother. Luke was as safe as a house. He would never betray a confidence.

"And how do you propose to start on this ill-advised search?" Mrs. Harvey asked, and stretched her hand out

gratefully for the drink that her husband brought to her.

"I'm coming into Granny's money next week. I can borrow on it from Daddy or someone. I imagine I can engage a private detective to help me. I know certain facts such as are in the letter from the Adoption Society."

For the first time, John Harvey felt faintly hostile towards his much-loved Charlotte.

"You're being rather stupid, aren't you, dear?"

"Oh, I'm sure you both think so!" exclaimed Charlotte, pink in the face.

"It's not only a question of being foolish. I think you're doing the wrong thing," put in Anthea.

Charlotte tossed her head.

"Is it so wrong to want to see my own mother?"

Anthea doubled her hands and looked at her husband.

"I can't cope, John. You can talk to her," she said, and walked out of the room.

6

CHARLOTTE looked at her adoptive father gloomily.

"How like some people to walk out just because they can't stand up to arguments," she muttered.

Now she encountered the most steely glance she had ever received from her father's bright blue eyes.

"Charl, you shock me. I didn't think you were so—unkind."

She bit her lip. At once she felt remorse. She had never in her life been so mixed up, teetering between the old ties and affection and the new ones she wanted to make.

"Oh, Daddy, I don't mean to be unkind—honestly."

"You've hurt your mother—Mummy." Mr. Harvey corrected the word.

"I'm sorry. I'll go and tell her. I'd hate to hurt either of you. I only want you both to try and see my point of view."

"I'm sorry, darling, it's hardly easy for us. And when you accuse Mummy of running out on an argument, I know you've had a shock, but it's been equally a shock for her. Oh"—he held up a protesting hand—"don't start telling me again that you ought to have been told from the start. I've agreed about that. And don't please run after Mummy now. Let her go. You and I will talk things out."

"Well, all I ask is to be allowed to do what I want without being treated as though I am a criminal," said Charlotte sullenly.

John Harvey looked at her, his eyes soft again. His heart went out to her. She was so young, and trying to be so mature. And how pretty she was, with those hot flushed cheeks and that shining auburn hair falling across them. Poor, pretty Charlotte! If only he could help her, advise her. Show her that he did, in fact, feel every sympathy but he could not countenance her cold, even callous lack of warmth and feeling towards Anthea and himself. They had tried to make her happy and secure for the last twenty years. How could she disregard that?

Charlotte said:

"Oh, don't let's fight, Daddy. You know I'm terribly fond of you—and Mummy. We just don't see eye to eye over this."

"No, we do not."

"You both would rather I did nothing about my mother?"

"Naturally."

"But I'd always be thinking about her and wondering."

"But why? Why build up a picture of a sweet wonderful mother who will make you feel it was well worthwhile combing the world to find her? Supposing, just supposing, you found a quite different sort of woman—even an unpleasant type. From what I remember of her photograph, she looked rather a sweet young thing with pathetic eyes but there is always the probability that she's grown into a person you wouldn't at all care for."

"Okay, then I'll never see her again, but at least I'll be glad I tried."

"All very self-centred. What about *her* angle? Supposing she is happily married with a family of her own. She might find you a most awkward intruder. In fact you might be the cause of smashing up her life. You don't seem to realise what a dangerous thing it is. Always

supposing that you'll find her, which, as you know, we doubt."

Charlotte plumped herself down on the sofa. With doubled-up fists she beat the cushions on either side of her. Tears magnified her eyes.

"Oh, it's all so . . . so . . . *difficult* . . ." She broke off on a sob.

John Harvey seated himself beside her and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Don't do anything in a hurry, darling. You're in a state now, but it will pass, I'm sure. Mummy feels—as I do—that we've been wrong to keep the facts from you, but please forgive us and just try to accept the situation, and —" He broke off.

"And do nothing about it, I suppose," Charlotte finished for him, and pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of her slacks.

"It would be best that way, really, dear."

Charlotte almost capitulated, but the devouring curiosity to find and see the woman who had given birth to her conquered. She caught Mr. Harvey's hand and put it against her damp cheek.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she choked. "Please forgive me, darling. But I must do this thing. It's stronger than I am somehow. Please, *please* don't hate me for it. Make Mummy understand that it's not that I'm against her or you, personally. I love you both and I'm grateful for everything . . ."

Mr. Harvey rose to his feet and sighed.

"You were always an obstinate one. Well—so be it. But I'm afraid you can't expect any help from us if you insist on making this search."

Charlotte swallowed.

"I don't expect it. I won't ask for it."

"And as far as I can see even though it's your birthday next week, you'll have to wait a bit longer than that for Granny's money. I know you are entitled to it but these things take time. You'll have to get in touch with her solicitors. There are shares to be sold, and so on. We'll have to see. You can't just rush out of the house tomorrow morning and start your search."

"Well, I want to," she said in a low voice.

"On your allowance? That won't go far if you mean to engage private detectives."

"Then I shall have to borrow, Daddy."

Mr. Harvey stiffened. Sympathetic he could be with the girl's emotional state. He understood the full significance of her psychological disturbance, but borrowing money was something that he had never done in his own life, nor would he countenance it in hers. He was not going to co-operate, and he told Charlotte so, categorically.

"And I warn you, darling," he ended curtly, "that if you get into the hands of moneylenders or anything like this—you'll be on your own. So for heaven's sake be careful what you do. As for Granny—good God—she'd turn in her grave if she thought her legacy was to be used for such a purpose."

Charlotte stood up. Her spirits were low, but the obstinate streak in her would not allow her to give way. If she must fight Mummy and Daddy over this, then the battle was on.

She had a sudden guilty feeling that Luke wouldn't approve. She was rather miserably alone in her objective. She could see that, but one of the things that Charlotte did not lack was courage. She went up to her adoptive father, took his arm between her hands, rubbed her cheek against his sleeve for a fleeting moment, then said:

"I'll manage. At least I'm lucky about being financially independent after next week."

John Harvey thought it singularly unlucky. He was silently, bitterly, opposed to the whole scheme.

He spoke in a colder voice than she had ever heard from him.

"I wish you luck. I only ask that you do this thing with as little hurt to your moth—to Mummy—as you can manage."

Then he walked out of the room.

He found his wife in her bedroom. He felt badly about the whole affair. Anthea, usually so poised and cool and rather dictatorial, was sitting on the edge of her big bed, her glass in one hand, a cigarette in the other, her shoulders bowed. She looked the picture of misery.

He went and sat beside her and put an arm around her. For a long time they had not made love regularly—although her physical attractions for him had never waned. Neither had she ever said no, or forbidden him her room, or her bed. But she had made it clear that she was no longer interested in that side of their marriage except on rare occasions. In Paris, for instance, only last night, they had slept together for the first time for over a year.

After a glamorous evening in one of the loveliest cities in the world, she had actually seemed like his old Anthea—sentimental, willing to dance cheek to cheek, to hold his hand as they walked home to their hotel under the stars. He had felt very close to her, although he knew his Anthea. It was only a fleeting mood with her. On the other hand, she remained a constant emotional disturbance to him. This morning, sure enough, she had been as friendly as ever—but just as detached. She was a queer mixture, he had long since decided. But whatever she did,

she had never forfeited his respect or admiration. She was just one of those women who was not highly sexed and he had had to accept the fact. There must be thousands of marriages of the kind which settled down to this kind of unexciting companionship.

Now Anthea turned to her husband and he felt her tears against his neck. It roused all his tenderness. He felt really angry with Charlotte.

"Damn that girl—upsetting you like this, my love," he said.

"It's all my fault. I know it. You were right, John. I should have told her."

"I won't have her upsetting you."

She kissed him and drew away, trying to laugh.

"You're very sweet to me, John, but it *is* my fault, and I can't really blame Charlotte. She must be terribly upset. I don't think she means to be ungrateful, do you?"

"No, and I think she'll come round to the old way of thinking and feeling about us, and probably she'll never find this wretched woman anyhow."

Anthea blew her nose.

"I'm scared for her, John. God knows what she *will* find. The woman may not *want* her. That's the ghastly thing for Charlotte."

"I warned her. She's only asking to be disappointed."

Anthea shrugged.

"Maybe her mother will turn out to be marvellous—all the things I've never been. Charlotte and I don't always see eye to eye. We have our differences."

"Only on the surface. Deep down you're devoted to each other."

Anthea lit another cigarette and sipped her drink. Her nerves were badly jangled. Up till now she had led a well-ordered life. She had always been rather envied by her

close friends who knew her home set-up; she was lucky, having a husband who adored her and gave her her own way, and wasn't too badly off. And she had Mike, her son. He, of course, was the apple of her eye. She admitted rather guiltily, today, that she felt more in sympathy with him than with Charlotte. But that was because really their natures were so alike. Mike was a Craven—like his grandmother—cool, self-sufficient and definitely unsentimental. Anthea had failed always to understand her adopted daughter when she was tense and passionate about things. So exaggerated. Yet Anthea loved her, and had always been proud of her beauty. And she had been the first baby in the house. They had been so delighted with the little auburn-haired baby girl. Anthea had almost begun to deceive herself into believing Charlotte was indeed her own flesh and blood. Until this unfortunate accident, she could also swear she had never *outwardly* made any difference between the daughter who was adopted and the son who was her own.

Now, suddenly, Anthea faced a problem she hardly knew how to handle. She finished her drink, got up and sat down in front of her dressing-table.

"What a sight I look! I must make my face up! Where is Charl?"

"In her own room, I think."

"And she really means to start this search?"

"Yes, she intends to raise the money somehow, she says."

"She's crazy."

"Well, I've warned her of all the pitfalls and I've told her we don't intend to help her financially because we don't approve of what she's doing."

"It's a pity she's to get Mother's money next week."

"Yes, I suppose she'll be bound to dip into it. I don't

know what these detective chaps charge, but it won't be cheap."

Anthea turned to her husband, her face well-masked again—no sign of stress. She was a strong-minded woman.

"I do hope there won't be a scandal among our friends."

"She's promised not to say one word. And in a queer way I think she still *wants* to look on us as her parents and this as her home. She just can't resist the temptation of trying to find her own Mama."

"Well, she's crazy," repeated Anthea.

"Have another talk with her, dear. Try to make her see sense. I can't."

"Well, if you can't, *I* can't," said Anthea. She finished combing her hair and got up.

"She's sure to start asking a lot of questions. You can't very well refuse to answer."

"About what?"

"Oh, what we did learn about her parentage."

"We never knew much. If you remember, we only saw their photographs, and we were told who and what they were."

Mr. Harvey put a hand to his eyes. He felt very tired.

"It's all so long ago."

"God, I could murder myself for leaving those papers in the desk," muttered Anthea, and began in a vague, disheartened way to tidy her room.

"Well, just tell Charl all you know. I suppose that's the least we can do."

"I don't at the moment feel very affectionate, but I'll try to remember that the whole thing is primarily my fault."

John Harvey looked at his slim, attractive wife with

pride. He'd always thought her a marvellous person. But somehow, today, the sight of her hair (so like Charlotte's), hurt him. It brought back too vividly the memory of the lies that had been told and the deception that had been practised when the Adoption Home presented them with that little auburn-haired baby, and Anthea had insisted on saying *she* was the mother.

"I must go and have a bath," he said abruptly.

A few minutes later as he walked out of his dressing-room he heard Anthea's high clear voice issuing from Charlotte's bedroom.

"I'm sorry I can't tell you any more, dear. Yes—I do remember that your mother looked—very attractive. No not like you. She was dark, with high cheek-bones—foreign-looking—Polish blood, of course. Apparently you were more like your father. He was the one with lightish red hair and fair skin."

Then from Charlotte:

"I'm not interested in *him*. But thanks for telling me about my mother. I don't expect you to understand, but I don't want us to quarrel, Mummy. I couldn't bear that . . ."

John Harvey did not wait to hear his wife's reply. He was not the type to eavesdrop. But when he considered what had happened to destroy the peace and security of his once happy, united home, he felt desperately sad. And as far as Charlotte's search for her mother was concerned, extremely worried.

7

A WEEK later, Charlotte faced the fact that she had set herself a task of considerable magnitude.

When Michael came back from Grenoble, she was in a slightly worse state of high tension than she had been on the day the mirror fell. She kept repeating those old fairy-tale words with bitter irony:

"'*Mirror, mirror, tell me true*' . . ."

Dear God, that was what had happened. The smashed mirror had resulted in her hearing the truth all right.

Mummy and Daddy had been very nice to her. In fact they were all nice—if rather too polite to each other. The atmosphere was definitely strained. They were, however, adamant about not giving her financial help or encouragement. She had never seen them so closely united as they were over this.

"It doesn't matter about *you* so much—it's this woman herself. She gave you up. You have no real right to try and find her." That was what they kept saying.

But Charlotte stuck to her personal belief that that young girl, twenty years ago, had been forced by circumstances to get rid of her baby and would be thrilled and pleased to see her.

Charlotte called on her grandmother's solicitors. The senior partner, Mr. Burkett, who dealt with the late Lady Craven's legal affairs, was very nice, very agreeable to Charlotte, but obviously on her father's side. She presumed he had been primed by Daddy before she ever got

to the office. First of all he advised her not to start the search, then he made it as difficult as he could for her to get the money. As Daddy had said, certain shares would have to be sold, and papers signed, and the law moves slowly, whatever the case.

When Charlotte realised that it might be a month or two before she could touch her legacy and Mr. Burkett politely but firmly refused to advance one penny, she turned to the only friend she could fully trust—Luke.

She telephoned him one evening when her parents had gone out to dinner and bridge. Luke seemed almost as against her as anybody else.

"Look, love, it isn't that I mind lending you the hundred pounds. Oh, hell—I *know* you'll pay it back. You needn't say so. It's not the point. I just wish you'd *chuck* the whole idea. I agree with your people. It's dangerous."

"You're all the same but I won't be put off," she answered. "And if you won't lend me the money, I'll go to a moneylender. I just didn't *want* to, that's all."

"For God's sake, *don't*."

"Oh, Luke, I hate asking you but you're the only person in the world I could think of," she said with a sigh, "I can't confide in anyone else. I've given them my word. I'll pay you back the moment I get Granny's money. Mr. Burkett promised I should receive my first cheque by September, anyhow."

"Are you coming down here with the family once Mike gets back from Grenoble? Can't we talk it over then?"

"I was coming, but I'm going to delay it for a bit. That's another thing that's upsetting the poor parents. Fish will be here to chaperone me but the parents don't like me staying on in Town."

"I'm not surprised—you're a bit of a menace, love."

"I'm sorry I rang you —" she began in a voice thick with tears.

He broke in:

"Don't be daft, darling. Do keep a sense of proportion."

"It's so unfair! Why should I be downed by everybody just because I want to find my mother?"

"Oh, if you can't understand why it's *wrong*, I can't make you see it. *It just is.*"

"If it's my mother's feelings you're all so worried about, I assure you I'll soon know if I'm not wanted, then I'll quit."

"And what precisely will you have gained?"

A cold, almost frightened feeling came over Charlotte but she persisted.

"I'll have done what I felt I must do."

"Must?" Luke repeated the word with some sarcasm.

"Yes, I must do it, Luke. For her sake as well as mine. I know if this had happened to me, no matter what happened in years to come, I'd so often have thought about my baby. I'd want to see her."

"You're too romantic, love. Everybody isn't like you. There are a lot of cold, harsh people in this world whose minds don't work the way yours does. You're probably in for a shock."

"I'm getting used to shocks," she laughed without humour.

"I hate to hear you like this," came Luke's gentle voice. "Why not give it all up, for the time being anyhow, and come down to St. Nevell. Come out fishing with me. There's nothing like a boat and the sea to make you forget everything else in the world. When I first got here, my own little world was pretty shattered, as you know. The sea was my great comforter. You love it here, too—don't you?"

"Yes," she whispered, and felt suddenly removed from her own troubles. She remembered how tragically, indeed, Luke had suffered before he went down to St. Nevell. He never spoke about it.

She could feel the warmth, the intimacy of his friendship across the miles that lay between them that night. She thought rather yearningly of that magnificent blue-green sea down in St. Nevell. Indeed, she loved it with all her heart. She could picture it. The white frill of foam on the breakers. The hiss as they creamed on the golden sands. The spume, floating up into the sky as the water crashed over the mussel-blue rocks. All the glory of a Cornish sunrise or sunset. The grey strong-winged gulls, screaming and wheeling overhead, then diving down for their fish; the tang of brine and seaweed in one's nostrils, the breath of the wind against one's face. Luke's little pub; the Harveys' attractive seaside home, 'Windhover'.

She almost broke in that moment—wondering why, when she had been so happy, she should bother to make this search. It was proving very unpopular. But the urge remained. She could not shake it off.

"Charlotte—Charlotte, are you there? Hello—hello!" came Luke's voice.

"Yes, I'm still here," she said, and was glad he could not see her tears.

"Come down, love, come down and talk things over again."

"No, not yet. I must get on with my search."

A sigh from Luke.

"I hand it to you for being an obstinate little idiot."

"Good-bye," she said, beginning to cry. "And forgive me for asking for the money."

"I shall send it to you tomorrow, Charlotte. You know I will. I'll post you a cheque in the morning."

"Oh, Luke, you angel!"

"I'm no angel, just as big an idiot as yourself. But I won't have you trekking around London trying to borrow a hundred quid. Don't tell your people, please. I oughtn't to be doing this—I'm on their side."

"No, you're on mine. You're my friend."

"I'm your friend, all right, but I'll never think this right."

"I'll prove that it is. You'll see—it'll be a great success."

"I hope so, but I'm going to make one condition about the money."

She felt warmly, sincerely grateful to him. He was the most splendid person on earth.

"What condition?" she asked.

"That you keep in close touch with me and tell me exactly what you're doing, what you're spending the cash on, and how things are going. Okay?"

"Okay—that's only fair."

"Good," he said and sounded relieved. "Then I can keep an eye on you. You're so damned impulsive, love, and not nearly as grown up as you think you are—twenty or not."

"Oh, Luke, I can't ever thank you enough for being so good to me. You'll get the hundred pounds back in a few weeks, I swear it."

He assured her once more that it wasn't the money he wanted back so much as the assurance that she was all right.

When his cheque arrived she wrote him a quick impulsive 'thank you' letter and got back one line from him:

Take care of yourself, Idiot, and let me know everything.

Then it was her birthday. That was hardly a happy day. In the past she and Mike had always found their parents generous and loving and ready with some sort of surprise gift. When they were home there was always a special party. Last year there had been a dance here in Alexandra Square. The year before they had gone down early to St. Nevell and held a huge party in the bungalow. Luke and his mother had been invited and had come when the bar at Gull Rock Inn closed.

Luke had refused to dance with Charlotte because he said he couldn't 'twist', neither did he know any of the new teenage steps. But in the end she had got him on to the floor and been surprised to find how deftly and gracefully he could move.

One or two of her teenage girl-friends had thought him very attractive with his darkly-tanned face, his bright handsome eyes and rough curling hair. He was a bit old for them, of course, a widower, and all that, but they still found him charming.

Charlotte had been proud of Luke.

But this year there was no celebration. Charlotte foresaw that her birthday would be a slightly embarrassing day to all, so 'covered up'.

"I've been asked out by a girl I met at the shop with Veronica. Do you mind if I go out to the theatre with her tonight?"

They hadn't minded. Everybody seemed to have pressing appointments that day. The family only foregathered for a few moments during breakfast when parcels were laid discreetly on Charlotte's plate, and John and Anthea both kissed their adopted daughter, and said "Many Happy Returns", with cold bright smiles and a hurt look in their eyes. Charlotte had seldom felt more unhappy.

During the afternoon she had a long talk with Old

Fish. Fish, who was so much in the family confidence. For the first time since she had discovered the truth, Charlotte questioned her.

Old Fish said:

"I went with your dear mother—Mrs. Harvey, of course, I mean—to fetch you from the Martlett Adoption Society office. You slept so peacefully in my arms, little lamb that you were, going down in the car to Cornwall where Mrs. Harvey was hiding away. I certainly remember it," Fish added sentimentally, "but I never knew anything about your own folk. Mrs. Harvey wanted it all kept a dead secret, so a secret it's been."

"It was wrong," muttered Charlotte and added: "Isn't it natural for me to want to go and find my own mother?"

Old Fish looked at her over the rim of her spectacles and put on one of her disapproving faces.

"I can't say I think it's very nice of you," she said.

Nice. What a word! What did being *nice* signify in this case, Charlotte wondered. Would she have been *nice* if she had taken the news of her true birth without batting an eyelid and just said: "Oh, how *interesting!* So I'm not really a Harvey. I am illegitimate and was once called Sophie Nagorski. No matter! I couldn't care less. I'm happy as I am."

Charlotte went through a few more uncomfortable moments when she first saw brother Mike again. She had had a conference with the family and they had begged her not to disturb the boy in the middle of his studies. Telling him that Charlotte was not his real sister might upset him. Charlotte didn't think it would make the slightest difference to Mike. Young people of his age were not particularly concerned with personal relationships. It would be a nine days' wonder and then would go out of his mind. He was far more concerned at the

moment with his own life and activities. At his age boys are egotists. Mike was no exception. He was an attractive person but entirely wrapped up in his own affairs.

He was particularly devoted to his mother and just now beginning to swing from his passion for rugby, football and tennis to an interest in girls. (He had found a little French friend in Grenoble, which fact he had confided in Charlotte rather than in his parents.) He got on very well with her although she was older.

In deference to Mrs. Harvey's wishes, Charlotte kept silence. She did, however, find herself viewing Mike with slightly different eyes once she saw him again. He was the same old Mike—better-looking now that he was broadening out. He used to be too thin. Not tall, but well-proportioned, and he had Anthea's sparkling eyes that tilted at the corners. He was brown from the sun just now, full of his life in France, and looking forward to the holiday down in St. Nevell. He gave Charlotte a playful whack on the back, greeting her with his usual, "Hi, Lottie!", which he knew annoyed her. Lottie was a nickname she abhorred. But Mike had always been a tease.

On this occasion she bit her lip, gave him a long interested look and thought:

You're not my brother. You're no relation at all. How too odd! We might have met at a party as strangers, and if we had, we would never have said more than two words to each other. I'd have looked on you as a schoolboy, not my type anyhow, and you wouldn't have been interested in me. You like petite blondes! Oh, how odd, odd, ODD!

The whole matter was beginning to fascinate as well as disturb her. She had never been good at keeping secrets so she found it hard not to blurt out the truth to Mike. But she restrained the impulse. Not being allowed to tell Emma was one of the hardest things of all. She had always

confided everything in her great friend. But she had promised her parents not to broadcast the facts that had just come to light. Charlotte had reflected: *Oh, well, if Mummy feels so deeply about it, I'll play along with her. As far as I'm concerned everybody can go on putting our two auburn heads together and saying how alike we are. I don't care!*

But she was going to find that other head . . . that darker head . . . that other face. She couldn't wait . . .

Charlotte faced the fact that Luke was her only confidential friend and safety-valve. The one person who *knew*.

Alone and unaided, Charlotte made her first plan of action. But she did so with trepidation because the whole affair had come about at an unfortunate time. In spite of what had been revealed to her, she still felt a strong urge to go down to her adored St. Nevell with the family—particularly as the weather was so fine just now. But she could not operate from a remote Cornish fishing village. Neither could she find it in her heart to put the whole thing off until the autumn. Funny how she remembered something that Granny had once said. Granny had lived a great deal on the French Riviera and liked to use French expressions.

"My little Charlotte, you get yourself so tied up in knots—you always seem to be *bouleversée*, poor pet!"

Never had Charlotte agreed with this more than today. *Bouleversée* was the word. She felt quite upside-down and really didn't know which way to turn. So she decided on a delaying action. She had a job, after all. She would just tell Mike, and anybody else who thought her behaviour odd, that Mrs. Allen needed her in the shop until the end of the first week in August. That would give Charlotte a little time to get her search organised.

Mike came back from Grenoble only a few days before they were due to move to St. Nevell. Charlotte had to move fast.

It wasn't difficult to give notice to Veronica Allen. Veronica was closing down her Interior Decorating firm for the month of August, anyhow. Somehow Charlotte felt she never wanted to go back. She had never really wanted that job and had taken it on only to please Mummy. It was just a question now of leaving Veronica a few days earlier than anticipated.

Then with a feeling of deep interest and excitement, she borrowed Anthea's car and drove off.

8

CHARLOTTE was going to the Martlett Adoption Society.

As might be expected, she found that Margaret Thompson, who, twenty years ago, had managed the Adoption Society, was no longer there.

Charlotte found herself facing a rather fat jolly-looking woman with grey curly hair and large tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses. Charlotte had had to wait an hour for this interview as she had no appointment. She had seen two couples come out of this room, and felt quite strange. *Just imagine*, she had thought, *twenty years ago, Mummy and Daddy came into this very place, with Fish, and fetched me away.*

Now she saw that all four walls of this room were hung with photographs of babies. Babies of all ages, in little frilly dresses; in rompers; in coats; some with nothing on but a nappy; every type of child and costume. These were presumably the 'adopteds'. Pictures had been sent to the Society by grateful adoptive parents. They were most of them signed.

The present woman director of Martlett's introduced herself.

"I am Mrs. Robinson—Olive Robinson. And you are"—she consulted her pad—"Miss Charlotte Harvey."

"Yes."

Olive Robinson smiled over her glasses at the young girl. How good looking, she thought—more than that—

quite striking with that beautiful pinky-silk hair (the sort of auburn shade Mrs. Robinson had always longed for). Well-dressed, too; that was a nice off-white linen suit with its small scalloped collar and pretty buttons. No hat. They never wore hats now. Nice short white gloves and a smart bag, white with tortoiseshell handle. Good bags and shoes were, in Olive Robinson's opinion, the sinecure of a well-turned-out female.

"You can't have come about an adoption for yourself, I am sure," she said, and her fat cheeks produced two endearing dimples. "You're much too young and not married."

Charlotte felt the strain lessen. She smiled:

"Oh, no—I don't want a—a baby."

"Have you come on behalf of someone else?"

"No—I —"

Charlotte broke off. Now that she was actually about to ask leading questions she felt almost petrified. It was all so serious—so *important* to her.

Mrs. Robinson noted the colour in the girl's cheeks and the tell-tale signs of stress. She was used to dealing with people. So many of the young married women who came in today to talk about adopting a child were nervous at first, uncertain of themselves, but soon gloriously confident that they wanted a baby. Pathetically anxious to get the right kind, too—and equally pathetically anxious not to be turned down. But what could be the matter with Miss Harvey? Educated, obviously had a good background and money, and didn't want to adopt a baby. What was worrying *her*?

She handed Charlotte a box.

"Have a cigarette? It calms the nerves."

"Oh, thanks," said Charlotte gratefully.

Mrs. Robinson lit it for her, then sat back, still

wondering how much Miss Harvey had paid for that two-piece and where she had found it.

Charlotte finally gathered sufficient courage to explain herself.

"I expect you keep the records of adoptions—even of twenty years ago. Well, I was—I mean—I came from here twenty years ago. That is—I'm the baby Mr. and Mrs. John Harvey, of Alexandra Square, got from you. I think they were in Cornwall at the time as Mrs. Harvey wanted to let everybody think she'd actually *had* me."

"One moment," said Olive Robinson, and now she was all attention, no longer concerned with the young girl's appearance. "Do you know for a certainty that it was our Society that supplied this child?"

"Yes—and I was that child and you kind of supplied me!" Charlotte said rather grimly.

"I see! Twenty years ago, you say—that would have been in Mrs. Thompson's time."

"Yes, I've seen the letter she wrote to my—my adoptive parents."

Mrs. Robinson narrowed her gaze, sat back and tapped her pen on the blotter.

"Why exactly have you come here, Miss Harvey?" she asked kindly.

"I want to find my mother," blurted out Charlotte.

Olive Robinson put her tongue in her cheek. So that was it! Well, no matter what had brought this about, she at once understood the situation. It was uncommon but it did happen. It had happened only the other day (was it last month?). A young man had rushed into the office and somewhat frenziedly demanded to be put in touch with his mother. A pity. Most of the 'adopteds' settled down to the fact that they had been adopted, and had not the slightest wish to find their original parents. But now,

listening to Charlotte, who was telling her a long story about having had the truth kept from her and only finding out by mistake, etc. etc., the matter was quite clear to Olive Robinson. When there was trouble it was usually because people didn't tell the children the truth as soon as they were old enough to know. It was always a psychological mistake not to do so. She listened until Charlotte finished talking, then said in a quiet firm voice:

"I'm immensely sorry but I cannot help you."

"Why not?"

"My dear, hasn't it been explained to you that we are strictly forbidden to do so? Under no circumstances whatsoever are we permitted to give an adopted child the name and address of its own mother and father—that is, even providing we have it. We hand our babies over to their new parents on the understanding that the real mother can claim the child during the first three months, but afterwards—once the legalities are over—the case is closed—finally."

Charlotte stood up, conscious that she was shaking slightly.

"I know. I read Mrs. Thompson's letters. But I still want to look for my mother."

Olive Robinson gave Charlotte a rather pitying look.

"You're upset at the moment. You've had a shock —"

"Oh, everybody keeps talking about my shock!" broke in Charlotte. "But it isn't only that. I assure you I'm quite calm and I don't understand *why* everybody thinks it's so unnatural for me to want to trace my mother."

"Not unnatural, but unwise."

Charlotte clenched her hands. Mrs. Robinson was saying all the things that had already been said. It was maddening. She should never have come here. She

had been told quite firmly that she couldn't expect help from the Adoption Society. Why had she been so obstinate?

"Won't you sit down again and talk —" began Mrs. Robinson gently.

"No, thank you," said Charlotte under her breath. "I can see it's useless."

"Do you know something," said Mrs. Robinson. "Even if I were *allowed* to give you the last address we had of your own mother, I wouldn't want to."

Charlotte flushed.

"I suppose because you think I'm being ungrateful to —to my people."

"That is one of the reasons."

"But I'm devoted to—to my people. Honestly! Why can't I go on being fond of them and want my own mother at the same time?"

"It would not work and it might be bad for your own mother. She mightn't *want* to be found."

Charlotte kept silence. This woman was pulling all the arguments out of the bag. Charlotte was beginning to believe that her search was going to prove a difficult one.

She said:

"Thank you, Mrs. Robinson. You may be right—I'd better go."

"I'm so sorry—please believe that, Miss Harvey."

"Thank you," repeated Charlotte.

Poor young thing, thought Mrs. Robinson, poor pretty misguided girl. What a lot of trouble she was building up for herself. But Olive Robinson had spoken the truth when she said that even if she knew how to put the girl in touch with her own mother she wouldn't want to. It was bound to be a mistake.

Thank goodness this doesn't often happen, Mrs. Robinson reflected, and to cheer herself up, took a look round the room at all the photographs of the happy smiling children, some with their proud adoptive parents. Thank goodness the average adopted was a huge success!

Charlotte, too, looked at that gay photographic array.

"They all look very happy!" she said.

"I sincerely hope when they grow up, they'll still be happy," said Mrs. Robinson.

Why am I not? I've got so much at home. Mummy and Daddy are so wonderful. Why am I letting this terrible longing get such a hold of me?

Charlotte asked herself these questions as she walked out of the Martlett Society offices. But she found no answer.

The first hurdle had been jumped—and she had fallen. But she was not defeated. She'd only just begun.

Her next appointment was at a private detective agency. Oliver Vincent Ltd. The office was in the Old Brompton Road.

Charlotte had been told about a local Advice Bureau. She had consulted them there and pretended that she was writing a detective book and needed information. She had quite enjoyed the subterfuge.

The Bureau had given her the name of this man, Oliver Vincent; she must place her trust in him now. She wasn't going to get help from anybody else so far as she could see.

She ascended a staircase to a first-floor room with a frosted door bearing the letters: OLIVER VINCENT—PRIVATE DETECTIVE AGENT.

She had made the appointment last night. But she felt a bit diffident about it. She was taking on a tough assignment, and knew it. It was rather frightening. She was,

somehow, relieved to see a young girl sitting at a desk typing.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Vincent," she said.

"Your name, please?"

"Miss Harvey."

The young typist, lodging a piece of chewing gum at the back of her teeth, nodded.

"Okay."

Charlotte deduced that Mr. Vincent was waiting in the inner office. His door was marked PRIVATE.

It all looked rather dusty and shabby. Charlotte waited impatiently.

The typist returned, shook back an untidy strand of hair, dislodged her chewing gum and started to munch again.

"Okay, you can go in."

Charlotte, trying to look dignified, walked into the private office of Mr. Vincent.

"Call me Vince," he said almost as soon as Charlotte was seated. "Everybody does."

She blinked. Mr. Oliver Vincent proved to be an amusing character. If she had expected to find a thin, sly-looking cautious gentleman wearing a shabby raincoat or, alternatively, a seedy little man with a bowler hat who played the part of a sleuth-hound, pursing elusive co-respondents in shady divorce cases, she found the reverse here.

Vince was a big plump man in his early thirties; he had ginger hair and a rather large ginger moustache, reminiscent of the R.A.F. His big white teeth flashed when he laughed (and he did a lot of laughing) and he had huge freckled hands which wandered all over the desk as he fumbled with his papers. Through horn-rimmed glasses he surveyed her with a pair of small but intelligent blue eyes.

"And what can I do for you, Miss—er—Harvey?" he boomed.

Slightly overcome, Charlotte stammered out her story.

Vince jotted down notes on the pad on his blotter, pausing now and then to ask further details and continuing to throw her quizzical glances over his hornrims.

"Um —" he kept saying. "Um—hum—I see!"

"I expect you may think it all too paltry—I mean, just not worth your while," Charlotte finished lamely and dived into her bag for a cigarette.

"No, no," said Vince, "have one of mine," and pushed a packet of filter-tips across the desk to her.

He lit the cigarette for her with his lighter. Charlotte began to smoke, feeling some of her tension easing.

She talked to Vince for a good ten minutes, and ended:

"Well, I've told you everything I know. I'm afraid it isn't much."

The detective stretched out his long legs, glanced at his note-book, then at his new client again. Quite a dish, he thought. Jolly nice figure. Not at all the type he was used to getting in here. How old was she? Twenty. A mere chicken. Crazy to find her mother. Curious! Mr. Oliver Vincent, after fifteen years of probing into other people's affairs, chasing runaways, miscreants, bankrupts, men and women connected with every kind of human misery or chicanery, was quite intrigued to work for a lovely and obviously well-educated girl. *Quite* a change. No sex—just an urge for her mother.

Yesterday a woman in her late forties had sat here, as Charlotte was doing—good looking, but tough as they make them, authorising him to find a husband who had walked out on her. The *names* she'd called him! Vince had barely heard such language even amongst the chaps

in the pubs. What a virago! But she'd had the money to pay and so he had sent his junior partner after the wretched husband. He pitied the fellow. No wonder he'd run away!

But there was the other side of the picture—like the poor sad woman who had been deserted by her husband, and who wanted to find him, not because she begrudged him his freedom but because she had been told she hadn't long to live. Her dying wish was to see the love of her youth once more before she departed this life. Vince had felt quite sentimental and brought his fees down to suit her pocket. Poor old creature! Oh, there were all kinds in the world but he had never before met one like Miss Harvey. Her air of distinction, those big dewy eyes, *and* the determination that lay behind that youthful beauty, intrigued him.

"No case is too paltry for me," he said. "Anyhow, I wouldn't describe yours as being all that paltry. It must have been one hell of a shock for you learning about your parentage."

Shock, thought Charlotte . . . that operative word again. With a sudden, rather pathetic need for self-justification, she broke out:

"Do you blame me for what I'm doing?"

"Certainly not. Most certainly not!" boomed Mr. Vincent. "Natural instinct. I'd do the same in your shoes."

"Oh, thank you," said Charlotte relieved, and felt that her detective, at least, was on her side. She added: "Do you think you have any chance of success?"

Vince cleared his throat and examined his notes again, mumbling.

"Sophie Nagorski—born 19th July 1946 . . . Maternity Home, Barnet . . . so on, and so on . . . hum, hum . . . well,

that's a help. The fact that your mother was of Polish birth and with a name like Nagorski makes it easier. If we don't find her right away, we may at least trace your grandparents."

Charlotte's heart gave a twist of excitement. *Her grandparents!*

It was really rather thrilling to hear Mr. Vincent describe them like that, in direct relationship with herself. It made them suddenly so real. Of course in a way it also made her feel guilty, disloyal to the memory of Granny—Lady Craven, whom she had adored, and missed, to this day.

Mr. Vincent went on checking his notes.

"Pity we don't know where the parents came from. Your mother's parents, I mean. But of course they never give away details at these adoption homes. You aren't alone in your objective, Miss Harvey. I have a pal in the same trade as myself who once went after the real father of a young chap. He fell out with his adoptive parents after a row at home."

"And did they find him?"

Mr. Vincent looked into the bright and beautiful beseeching eyes and found himself wishing that he was not just a private detective struggling to pay his income tax and keep a wife and four children. Also that he could have met Miss Harvey in different circumstances.

I could have gone for her in a big way, he thought sadly.

But Vince never allowed personal feelings to interfere with his business. He was scrupulous in his behaviour towards his women clients. He had to be. He had to deal with many types who came and sat in this office and made themselves a nuisance. The man-hunter—the less

attractive of the female species who couldn't find any fun outside in her own world and hoped to get it in a detective agency. Phew! On more than one occasion he'd had difficulty in extricating himself from one of *that* sort. He usually handed them over to his partner, Don MacKay, who was a sober Scot without a sense of humour and with the dogged obstinacy of his race. Don could always get rid of the unwanteds. Women could not do much against the wall of absolute sexless disinterest in the species that Don put up when he wanted. But before Vince had had Charlotte Harvey in his office for twenty minutes, he felt deeply anxious to help her. He showed a discreet sympathy and understanding. He was glad to see that she seemed ready and willing to place her trust in him.

He answered her question about the young man who had searched for his father.

"We found the father but wish we'd never tracked him down, Miss Harvey. He turned out to be a con man who'd done time and he was just out of jail when the boy linked up with him. The lad was so shocked, he sort of went to the bad himself afterwards. I won't go into details but I assure you the success my pal had in that case was unpleasant. But he said he did warn the boy not to make the search."

Charlotte felt her cheeks scorch.

"Are you warning *me* too?"

"No, no, no, decidedly not. The case I quoted was an exception. I don't suppose one in a million adopted babies have bad blood in them."

Charlotte felt a little sick suddenly.

"Do you think—these things *are* in the blood—that heredity is so—so—oh, I mean—that if your father is a bad lot, *you'll* become one, too?"

"No, no, decidedly not," boomed Mr. Vincent again, anxious to cheer her up. "It's all a matter of chance, you know. I've come across all sorts. A saint could give birth to a potential criminal and a criminal can produce an angel. You can never tell. But naturally it's a toss-up what you will find, isn't it, I mean when you go searching for a parent about whom you know virtually nothing."

Charlotte looked away from Mr. Vincent's red face and freckled hands, and stared rather miserably out of the dusty window. A sudden deep depression damped her ardour. Were Mummy and Daddy right? Luke, too? *And* that woman at the Adoption Society? They had all told her she ought to give up the whole idea.

The detective interrupted her thoughts:

"Now, don't you have any doubts. There's no need. I don't suppose you'll find *your* mother's just come out of prison . . . ha, ha, ha! Not the type. Couldn't be. Just a nice little Polish girl who got into trouble and couldn't keep her baby. Nothing more to it than that."

Charlotte brightened. The red-headed Vince was really rather a poppet, she decided. Big, coarse, funny, but nice, and he did cheer her up considerably.

"You're absolutely right," she said. "My—my adoptive parents saw my mother's photograph and said she looked sweet. She came of good people. Her father was a Polish architect."

"Quite so, we've got that to help in our search. If he qualified in this country we can soon look him up and find out a bit about him. I shouldn't have told you about that young chap. It was stupid of me. His case wasn't relevant to yours. His adoptive parents didn't get him through an authorised home, anyhow."

"I'm sure my mother will be very nice," Charlotte said softly.

Vince coughed and blew his nose.

"Excuse me, Miss Harvey. My hay-fever this time of the year. Blasted nuisance!"

"Poor Mr. Vincent," said Charlotte sympathetically. "My young brother —" She broke off. She had been about to say that her young brother Michael suffered from hay-fever. But somehow she felt so upside-down about Mike—just as she felt about the rest of the family—she couldn't discuss any of them.

Nevertheless she felt more cheerful now. Nice Mr. Vincent (Call me Vince), would help her and possibly succeed. He gave her confidence.

"If you don't think me impertinent, Miss Harvey, it's likely we'll find someone just as—hum—hum—attractive as yourself," said Vince and took off his glasses and polished them.

"Thank you," said Charlotte, blushing. She added with a sigh: "Although I'm supposed to be physically more like my father."

"You've no wish to look for him?"

"No—none. I've no interest in him at all." And up went Charlotte's head.

Mr. Vincent noted the long line of her graceful throat and felt his heart turn over. Why, the hell, he thought, couldn't he get more clients like this one? He was so tired of the dreary people, and the sordid side of his job. The endless waitings, probings, spyings, standing out in rain and wind, ferreting into holes and corners, turning up countless files, accepting snubs, crashing into barriers. The whole rotten game (and rotten it seemed at times) was often most unattractive. However, it could be lucrative and, on occasions, amusing.

He, Oliver Vincent, wasn't really as tough a guy as he ought to be. Judy, his wife, called him a 'softie'. Once she had sneered and told him that if he cut off his red handlebar of a moustache he'd lose his strength—like Samson. Not very complimentary. But she was a good girl, Judy, and the four kids were a lot of fun as well as a lot of trouble. *What* was he thinking about, letting the sight of this lovely auburn-haired young girl disturb him like this? She was like a flower, fresh and fragrant, sitting here in the ugly old office that echoed with stories and complaints, the malice and the bitterness of past clients.

He discussed the line that he meant to take on Miss Harvey's behalf and when she suggested that she might save time by going, herself, to the Barnet Maternity Home, he agreed.

"Better a female interrogator in a place like a maternity home, eh? What, what!" He gave his sonorous laugh and offered Charlotte another cigarette which she refused.

"I'll try there now," she began.

"Hold on," he said. "We'll see if we can ferret out the addresses of what maternity homes there are in Barnet. You might have to visit the lot before you get any satisfaction."

"Surely there can't be so many?"

"Possibly not. We'll see. Miss Cox isn't bad at rooting out that sort of thing. She has more brains than you think behind all that ruddy chewing gum. But you can't stop these kids doing things like that if they want to, these days. She says chewing calms her nerves."

Charlotte smiled bleakly, then leaned across the desk and, with some embarrassment, mentioned the question of payment.

"I—I would just like to know how I stand, Mr. Vincent."

"Of course, of course. Well, it's an accepted scale really. It works out at about a guinea an hour—which means, of course, that if we're on the same case all day, it might run you into say—ten quid or so. Then if it goes on for longer, it could reach fifty quid, and so on. I can't say it's cheap, but it isn't expensive considering the trouble we go to, plus our expenses and overheads. You agree?"

She nodded. She was not really surprised. It was no more than she had expected. If her expenses ran to more than the hundred pounds, she hoped by that time to have laid hands on her own money, so that she could pay Luke back, too.

Vince rang a bell and summoned Miss Cox. Still chewing, the girl entered and cast a dreary look from him to his client. She was an amazing sight, Charlotte thought. Skinny, with a tight dress well above the knees. Her face was of deathy pallor; two enormous eyes heavily outlined with black mascara. She droned nasally at her employer:

"Yes, Mr. Vince."

"Look up the street directory, and get on the phone, too, and see if you can find addresses of all the maternity homes in Barnet. Try and find out for how long they have been in existence, by the way."

"Yes, Mr. Vince."

She exited, leaving a strong whiff of cheap perfume behind her.

"She's all I can get," Mr. Vincent lowered his voice to Charlotte confidentially. "Good typists and assistants cost the earth these days. They're as rare as clean ten-shilling notes."

"I suppose so," said Charlotte, and decided that she would, after all, have another cigarette to calm her nerves while Miss Cox made her investigations.

This was the beginning, she thought. A rising excitement chased away some of her depression.

It was the beginning. She was going to find her mother —for better or for worse.

9

THAT next morning, a subdued and depressed Charlotte put a call through to Luke while her parents were out. Anthea was going to a lunch party to which Charlotte had also been asked, but she had excused herself. That, in itself, had been a bone of contention with Mrs. Harvey.

"Have things changed so far that you have no intention of coming with us any more to *anything*?" she asked her adopted daughter rather bitterly.

"Oh, Mum darling, no, it's just that I'm not in the mood and don't much like lunch parties," Charlotte had replied.

But she had seen the sadness in her adoptive father's kindly blue eyes, as well as the reproach in Anthea's—and was angry just because she felt so guilty. She couldn't get through the rest of the day until she had spoken to Luke.

Curled up on her mother's bed, the white telephone beside her, she poured out her troubles to him.

"Oh, Luke! Yesterday I had an awful day—quite pointless, really."

"What's been happening, love?"

She described her interview with Vince at the detective agency.

"He's rather an amusing go-ahead sort of man—a little too familiar at times—but well-meaning. And he has done his best but without results so far."

"My sweet child, give the fellow a chance. He's only just started."

"I know. I suppose I'm impatient."

"Daft, my love, as I have told you several times."

"Okay—daft," echoed Charlotte and felt the tears of frustration spring to her eyes.

"And how familiar *is* your detective, might I ask?" the question came from Luke.

"Oh, not so you'd notice. Just a bit 'hail-fellow-well-met'. By no means the yes-mam, no-mam type with a bowler hat. He looks like an ex-officer in the R.A.F."

"One of my old associates perhaps."

"Oh, good heavens, *no!* I always forget you've had anything to do with flying."

"So do I, sometimes," said Luke and sounded none too happy about it. Charlotte added:

"Dear Luke, I wish you were nearer—so that I could see you."

"Well, why don't you come down to St. Nevell?"

"As a matter of fact I probably shall be coming with the parents for a week, anyhow."

"That's good news. Why the change of plan?"

"Well, Vince—my detective—says I can't do anything much for a bit. He's got to get on with the enquiries himself now I've failed to find the home where I was born. I spent hours in Barnet—but no success."

"Poor Charlotte!"

"Oh, don't waste any pity on me. I'm sure I deserve to fail," she said with a brief laugh. "Everyone says I'm doing the wrong thing. But it was a blow, Luke. I can't tell you how awful it is coming up against a blank wall."

Silence from Luke. She knew quite well that he was abstaining from pointing out to her that she had been warned . . . She went on to describe the weary and

fruitless combing of all the maternity nursing homes in which she *might* have drawn her first breath. There were, in fact, four but only two which had been in existence in 1946. At the first one she visited, she had received scant help. The Matron was on holiday and her deputy had no access to any books or records which might show the names of mothers who had been admitted so long ago. They were very busy and had little time to give Charlotte. She was told to come back when the Matron returned from her holiday.

At the other old-established home, they had examined their records but ascertained that there had never been a patient of the name of Nagorski.

"I may have luck when the Matron of that first place comes back, but somehow I don't feel hopeful," said Charlotte.

"I'm sorry you've been so disappointed, love," said Luke.

"Of course, when I told Mr. Vince, he said one had to expect continual rebuffs and disappointments in these searches."

"Well, since you're going to pay him, why work yourself?" asked Luke.

"I just like to take an active part."

"I understand."

"You understand everything," she said and bit her lip in an effort not to cry.

"When do you expect to hear from your detective?"

"In a day or two perhaps, but when I told him I had to wait for that Matron to come back, he said he would get on with making enquiries at the Royal Institute of Architects. He should be able to find out when my grandfather qualified, and they might trace him, that way. I asked Mummy but she didn't know much about him. Martletts

only told her at the time that the Nagorski family lived in England and had done so long before the war. So if my grandfather worked in this country, he would have trained here. But there are about nineteen Schools of Architecture in Great Britain, so Mr. Vince will have rather a job getting his information. There's a training centre at Cambridge University, too. He can ask there."

"Well, it's lucky your grandfather has such an unusual name," Luke remarked.

Charlotte agreed.

"That's all that can be done for the moment so why not come down here with your parents," Luke added, "and let the sea air blow away some of the cobwebs?"

Charlotte admitted to a sudden hunger for the blue, blue sea on that Atlantic coast—and for the comfort of Luke's presence. Suddenly, somehow, he had become very necessary to her. She said impulsively:

"Okay—I will. I'll tell the parents tonight. I'll come down for a week, anyhow. Mr. Vince can always get on the phone to me at 'Windhover' and if there's anything urgent I can fly from St. Mawgan."

"Okay, love. Now this is being a very expensive call. There've been a lot of pips. Hadn't we better leave all other news until we see each other?"

"Yes."

"I look forward to seeing you. Don't change your mind."

"I won't," she said. "Good-bye for now, Luke darling."

She only realised when she put down the receiver that she had never before called him 'darling'. A faint colour rose to her cheeks and there was also a very slight increase in the tempo of her heartbeats. She sat still for a moment, staring at the telephone but seeing Luke—Luke with his brown, lean face and wonderful, warm eyes—feeling as

though he were actually in the room with her, giving her strength, reviving her drooping spirits, cherishing her. Yes, that's what Luke did, he *cherished* her. She adored him, she thought. And was it still the kind of adoration she used to feel when she was a leggy schoolgirl, with a slight crush on the handsome widower with the tragic past who had taken over the little Cornish inn? Or was it more? Had it moved suddenly into something more serious?

She shook her head and dismissed the thought.

In her room she began to write in the diary she had started. It was to chronicle every move in this search for her mother. But somehow as Charlotte looked around her familiar bedroom, she found it difficult to jot down more than a few words. She kept thinking about Luke. Yet she didn't want to be diverted.

She tried to turn her thoughts to her brother—and to yesterday.

Michael had been out all day on the river with a school friend who lived in Marlow. He had come back to a late dinner.

When they were at the table, the four of them—herself, Mike and the parents—it might almost have been the old happy days of blissful ignorance, she thought sadly, before she *knew*.

Mike was full of talk about his day on the river and the double sculling he had tried out with his friend, which including capsizing in the water and having to swim ashore. He was, as usual, full of high spirits. Charlotte envied him. He, alone of all of them, was ignorant of what had happened. To him, Charlotte was still the sister to whom he was devoted. But in general, Charlotte found the evening happier than it had been the night before. She tried to take part in chatter and laughter and not to

betray her own mixed feelings. But mixed they were, and after coffee she said she was tired and went to bed.

Mrs. Harvey had followed her upstairs for a moment, and given her a rather sad anxious look.

"Is everything all right, Charl? Have you had a good day?" She asked the question with difficulty, knowing exactly what the girl had been doing.

"Nothing special," Charlotte muttered and avoided the older woman's searching gaze.

"Oh, well—er -just take care of yourself," said Anthea.

Suddenly Charlotte put her arms around her and hugged her.

"Mummy, don't be too upset with me. I know you and Daddy are cross with me but do try to understand."

Anthea Harvey kissed the girl's soft warm cheeks with genuine emotion.

"We are *trying* to understand—believe me. But naturally it's hard."

"It's hard for me, too," said Charlotte in a strangled voice.

"Well, dear, I'll say good night. I'm not going to ask questions. I just can't. I couldn't bear the details of what you are doing. But you do look terribly tired tonight."

"I am a bit," Charlotte admitted.

"One thing's cheered us up—that you intend to come down to St. Nevell—even for a few days," added Mrs. Harvey.

Now Charlotte felt more tenderly towards the woman she had always looked upon as mother than she had been able to feel since the incredible discovery.

"You're much nicer to me than I deserve, Mum—I know it. You must think me perfectly beastly."

"Don't let's analyse things," Mrs. Harvey spoke

sharply, because she did not want to burst into tears. "The older I grow, the more I realise that nobody can control anyone else's life. You aren't a child any longer, Charl—you must choose the way you want to go. But just—be careful. That's all we ask."

Charlotte turned away and made pretence of brushing her hair.

"Thanks, Mummy—I will."

"We'll pack tomorrow and get away on Friday," added Mrs. Harvey as she walked to the door. "I've dropped a note to Mrs. Trenown. She'll air all the beds and prepare as usual. It should be lovely down there if this good weather lasts. I know Mike and Daddy are looking forward to it rather more than I am. But you know how I love London. Good night, dear."

After she had gone, Charlotte hid her face in her hands, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the affair which had dropped like a bomb into her peaceful well-ordered life.

Lucky Michael, she thought—going down to 'Windhover' without a care in the world, looking forward to his swimming, his fishing, the long walks over the cliffs, and meeting the friends he had made down there.

If I could only put back the clock, Charlotte thought, her heart stricken, *if only none of it had happened and I could be the old Charlotte Harvey who had a right to that name—more than a legal right—the right of blood—of true parentage!*

Why couldn't she blot out what she had learned, and behave as though things *were* the same? Why look for her mother? Why? *Why?*

She could find no answer to such questions. She only knew that the clock could never be put back and that she must go ahead.

But for Charlotte there was to be no Cornwall.

While she was trying to put a few clothes for the holiday into a case, Oliver Vincent telephoned her.

"I have news for you, Miss Harvey."

Charlotte felt her whole body grow tense.

"You haven't found —?"

"No, not your mother, Miss Harvey, but I have been lucky enough to trace your grandfather. Pretty quick work, if you don't mind me saying so," came Mr. Vincent's hearty voice.

Charlotte began to shake. She was thankful the family were all out and she was alone in the house except for Old Fish who was too deaf to hear the conversation, anyhow.

"Go on," she said excitedly.

"Your grandfather, Stanislaw Nagorski, qualified at the Regent Street Polytechnic School of Architecture in 1930. They only knew one address—the old one the student came from and that was thirty-seven years ago. As expected I drew a blank there. His house had changed hands a great many times since the Nagorski family occupied it."

"Where was it?" asked Charlotte breathlessly. She felt that every detail she could learn about her mother's family would be like the first strokes of a painting which finally would grow into a clear picture, so that she could see it all.

Vince told her the house was in a small terrace off the Pimlico Road.

Obviously, Charlotte thought, the Nagorski family didn't have much money. But I wonder why my grandfather ever left Poland and why did he choose to become an architect in England? Perhaps he was born in England. Fascinating! So many things for me to find out.

Vince went on talking. He was a fast worker. Through devious channels—he told Charlotte he would not bore

her with them — he had discovered that Stanislaw Nagorski had taken his first job with an English firm of architects in Holborn. This firm was still in existence. Vince went to see them. He was lucky. There was one elderly partner there who remembered the young Pole who had been his contemporary. He described Nagorski as a clever youngster, but somewhat temperamental. After a series of 'dust-ups' he had left the firm. Almost immediately afterwards the Second World War came, and Nagorski joined the Polish Air Force.

It had not been too difficult after that for Vince to follow the trail. Nagorski's name was to be found in the Polish Air Force records. Apparently he had been stationed in Scotland during the greater part of the war and survived the many hideous aerial battles which had resulted in the deaths of so many of his countrymen. He, himself, crashed on his last sortie just before the war ended. He had lost an arm. After that he had been invalided out. It was easy for Vince to follow this up and ascertain that Nagorski was alive today and still receiving his wound pension.

Charlotte gasped.

"Then you found him?"

"I know where he is and of course the records show that he had a wife, and a daughter."

Now Charlotte felt her face grow quite white.

"My mother," she breathed.

"That's right, Miss Harvey."

"Oh, Mr. Vince—we must contact him at once. He will lead us to *her*."

"Just a sec. It appears Mr. Nagorski left England two years ago, and now lives in France."

"Oh!" exclaimed Charlotte, her heart galloping. "Which part?"

"A place in the South of France—Le Trayas."

"Oh, I know it," exclaimed Charlotte excitedly. "I know it. I went there with my people a few years ago. It's near La Napoule. It's absolutely beautiful."

"Well, I've got the address where the pension is sent, and tomorrow I propose to go over and find the old man. When I say old," added Vince, "I suppose he must be in his early sixties. Your mother was born thirty-seven years ago."

On one of her blind swift impulses, Charlotte said:

"*I'll* go to Le Trayas, myself. I'll see my grandfather."

"Well now, come, come," laughed Vince. "You're not going to pay us and do the work, are you, Miss Harvey?"

"But I want to. I know Le Trayas and I want to be the first one to see my grandfather. He'll tell me about my mother. He mightn't tell *you*!"

"You may be right. Okay, Miss Harvey, *you* go to Le Trayas and let us know how you get on."

"But you've done the initial job, the essential one, in tracing him. Oh, I do thank you!" exclaimed Charlotte excitedly.

They spent the next few minutes discussing a future plan of action. At the end of this, Charlotte put down the telephone and rushed into the kitchen where Fish was making one of her good veal-and-ham pies for the family to take down to St. Nevell.

"Fish, Fish, I've found my grandfather!" She almost shouted the words.

The old woman looked at the young, flushed, brilliant-eyed girl rather bleakly.

"Whatever do you mean, Charlotte?"

"Just that I know where my own grandfather is, and I'm going to see him and make him tell me where to find my mother."

Miss Fish shook her head.

"Well—*I don't know!*" she said in a disapproving voice.

"Oh, Fish. But it's *marvellous*—I think the Oliver Vincent Agency is simply terrific to have found him so quickly. All due, of course, to the fact he is Polish and it was so much easier to trace the family than if their name had been Smith or Jones or something. And just fancy, Fish, my grandpa lost his arm whilst flying in an aerial battle over England. He must be very brave and splendid."

"Humph," said Fish sniffing. "Well, your Dad—John Harvey—is brave and splendid, too."

At once the bubble of Charlotte's excitement and happiness was pricked. It exploded in her face. She went crimson.

"I know," she said under her breath. "But please don't look like that at me, Fish. I'm not trying to compare my own people with—the Harveys. They're different—that's all. The Nagorskis are my flesh and blood. I can't be blamed for feeling excited at the idea of meeting up with them."

"Well, as you know, Charlotte, I don't hold with any of it," said Fish, and continued with her pastry-making.

"Oh, *Fish!*"

"It'll come to no good and your poor Mum and Dad are very upset about it all and I don't like it," said the old nurse. "I'm nothing if not honest."

"I can't argue with you. You just don't understand. Nobody does," said Charlotte and ran out of the kitchen and up to her bedroom.

But she refused to be upset by Fish's attitude. The detective had traced her mother's father. That was a terrific move. She felt that they had already cleared the most formidable hurdle and felt triumphant when she

remembered the secrecy surrounding her birth, and the refusal of the Martlett Adoption Association to help her in any way.

Only when the first wave of excitement had submerged her and she came up gasping did she allow a tiny feeling of guilt to creep into her conscience. It seemed rather mean, in a way, ferreting the truth out like this when it wasn't really permitted. How awful it would be if those who were against her should be proved right and her search ended in disaster.

Then Charlotte cast away all misgivings and considered her journey to Le Trayas. Mr. Vince had given her the address. Presumably, Stanislaw Nagorski had decided to settle down in the Midi with her grandmother. So she would meet them both. It would be madly thrilling, and they would be equally thrilled to meet her.

A moment later she was on the telephone again—to Cornwall.

"Luke," she said as soon as he answered. "I know you'll be angry with me but I'm not coming down to St. Nevell tomorrow."

"Why?"

"I'm going to the South of France. I'm just about to try and get an air ticket, and if I can't, I'll go by boat and train."

"To the South of France?" echoed Luke. "But why? Who with?"

She poured out the explanation and ended:

"So you see how important it is to me. You can't blame me for wanting to go at once."

A moment's silence.

"I don't blame you but I repeat what I've said many times since you started on this thing, love—it's cracked. It's just *not on!*"

"Oh, Luke, don't start lecturing me. I couldn't bear it. I'm so thrilled about having found my grandfather. Please be sympathetic."

"If you want to know the truth, I could willingly beat you."

"Oh, Luke!" Her voice was bitterly disappointed. "Then you're against me. You promised you wouldn't be."

Another silence. Then from Luke:

"Don't let's waste time. We've had it all out. Have you told your people?"

"No, they are all out. I'll tell them when they come home."

"They're not going to like it."

"I'm in the doghouse anyhow," she said with a short laugh.

And for a moment she sat there, speechless, miserable, all her joy in the discovery of the Nagorskis fading out.

10

At the other end of the telephone at Gull Rock Inn, Luke Martin struggled with his own mixed emotions. During the conversation with Charlotte he had become a surprised and confused man. Surprised because of his own sharp reaction to the news she had given him—confused because he could not really believe it possible he should feel so bitterly disappointed that she was not coming down tomorrow. But he had wanted so much to have Charlotte down in St. Nevell again. To watch her growing brown in the sun. To walk with her on the springy turf, over the tall cliffs, along the fresh, crunching, seawashed sands; or to sit on the rocks and talk to her—on all the subjects they enjoyed talking about. And see her come into the pub with her family—or alone—silky auburn hair hanging over her sun-tanned cheeks, limpid hazel eyes laughing at him. (Or, if she was in a bad mood, those same eyes filled with tears, calling for all the tenderness in his nature, a nature that had always wanted to comfort and protect the young, the innocent, the weak.)

In one way, Charlotte *was* weak; in another so strong. Just now she was being frighteningly strong in her determination to trace the woman who had brought her into the world.

Oh, God, he thought, anything might happen to her, alone in France.

And he knew in this instant of revelation that it was more than mere affectionate friendship that he felt for

Charlotte. *It was love.* The sort he had imagined for ever finished with. After Bridget's tragic death he had been so certain he would never replace her in his heart or his life. It confounded him to have to face up to the fact that he was deeply in love again and with Charlotte. Especially as she was so much younger than himself. The least impulsive of men, he now gave way to a sudden blinding desire to rush to her—take care of her—because he feared she might do something crazy. The Lord alone knew what she would find, he thought, when she met her Polish grandfather.

She couldn't be allowed to go alone. Damn and blast that detective chap for agreeing to it, although what did it matter to him? It would be saving him a journey.

"Hello! hello!" came Charlotte's anxious voice. "Are you still there? Have we been cut off?"

"No," said Luke. "We haven't."

"Are you very angry with me?" she began.

"I'm coming with you," he interrupted.

Now it was Charlotte who was shocked. She gasped:

"Coming with me?"

"Yes, if you'd like me to."

"But you can't. How can you?"

"Do you want me to?" he repeated.

"Yes, of course, it would be marvellous but you can't —" She was stammering.

"You seem to be able to do anything, so why can't I?" he said with a faint ironic laugh.

"But you can't get away from the pub right in the middle of the season."

"It'll only be for a few days, or probably only two at the most—won't it?"

"Well—yes, y-yes, but —"

"All you want to do is to try and contact your grand-

father and ask for your mother's address, isn't it?" he went on.

"Yes."

"Very well. It's settled. I'll get hold of Joe. You know, Major Trewithin. He's home on leave. He'll give Mother a hand until I get back. He adores the pub—and Mama."

Charlotte was speechless for an instant. This was a turn of events she had not expected. She had to admit that she felt utterly relieved by the idea of Luke going to France with her. It would be bliss to have him—her guide and mentor—rather than be alone.

"Oh, Luke!" she said. "What'll you tell your mother? You can't tell her the truth."

"No, I shall just say it's urgent business. She won't ask questions. She never does. In any case I'm not a boy any longer. I conduct my life as I wish to. But *you* won't be able to tell your people either, Charlotte. I don't like lies or deceptions but there it is. I can't have you rushing off to the Continent alone, and they'd be staggered if you said I was going with you."

"I agree."

"Well—say nothing about me. Just book two air tickets to Nice. We'll take a train to Cannes and hire a car from there to Le Trayas. It's odd, you going there. I always thought it one of the most beautiful places on the Côte d'Azur. If you want to know—I spent most of my honeymoon there."

Charlotte bit her lip.

"Won't it be rather miserable for you to go back?" she began.

"A little while ago I might have agreed with you," he said in what she thought rather an odd voice, "but it's time I laid some of my ghosts. I fully admit it. I shall *not*

let it be a miserable return. I shall be too busy looking after your interests to be miserable."

"It's terribly good of you, Luke. You don't know how I appreciate it. At such short notice, too."

"I agree. But that's the way things are. Everything seems to happen at once."

"And please don't be embarrassed if I say that the expenses are on me," said Charlotte, suddenly feeling extremely embarrassed herself. "You've lent me the hundred pounds but as you know I am paying it all back and your ticket must come out of that."

"You will *not* pay my expenses," came from Luke. "I may only run a small Cornish pub but I've got some private means, and as I rarely spend a shilling down here I can afford the fare. I shall count my few hours in the South of France as a nice, short, extravagant holiday. *And* I shall enjoy it."

"Luke, you really are wonderful."

Now he laughed. Some of the tension between them eased.

"I'm not sure I don't want my head examined. Think of the scandal, if we do run into anyone we know. Luke Martin and Charlotte Harvey—off to the South of France. And for what purpose?"

Charlotte found herself able to laugh with him.

"It does sound pretty awful. They'll think we're eloping or something."

But the moment she had said those flippant words, she regretted them. For her heart seemed to behave in an extraordinary way that almost hurt, and Luke's voice, when he spoke again, had suddenly grown cold.

"Please let me know the flight number if and when you get the tickets to Nice and I'll meet you at London

Airport. All I ask is that you don't let any of your family see you off."

"They won't be able to. They're all going down to St. Nevell in the morning."

"Oh yes—I'd forgotten. So much the better."

"I'll get on to the travel agent straight away. I'll ring you again later, Luke. In time for you to get the night train."

She put down the receiver and sat a moment staring in front of her. She could hardly believe what she was about to do. As Luke had said, everything seemed to happen at once. She couldn't believe that she was actually planning to fly to the South of France to see her grandfather—with Luke Martin. Her beloved Luke.

Beloved, to what extent? That was the burning question to which for the moment she had no definite answer. She only knew that she was in a state of frantic excitement as she picked up the telephone book to find the number of the travel agency in Sloane Street which her parents always used.

The tall charming man who ran Cadogan Travel Ltd. had dealt with the Harvey family for years but never before with the young daughter. He was a little surprised to find that Miss Harvey, herself, wanted two seats for Nice urgently, at twenty-four hours' notice.

"I don't know that I'll be able to get them but I'll do my best," he told her and wondered who the second seat was for.

Charlotte, herself, felt a trifle embarrassed when she gave Luke Martin's name as well as her own but she had no other choice. Now it was a question of waiting to see what luck they would have. It was a considerable relief and an added excitement when the secretary telephoned Alexandra Square to tell her that they had had luck.

There were two cancellations. Charlotte and her companion could get on the Air France Caravelle which left London Airport at ten a.m. tomorrow.

"Thanks awfully," was Charlotte's breathless reply. "And please book us back for, oh wait . . ." She made a rough calculation in her mind. They couldn't need more than forty-eight hours in Le Trayas at the most. Certainly Luke mustn't be allowed to be away so long from his job on her behalf . . . She went on: "Yes—we'll want to come back on the Friday."

Then she contacted Luke again to tell him the news.

"Frightfully lucky—we've got two cancellations on the morning Caravelle Air France."

She could almost hear a gasp from Luke.

"Crikey! You move fast, love, I must say."

"Are you sorry now you said you'd come?" she asked anxiously.

A pause, then:

"Certainly not. I'll come up on the night train, breakfast at Paddington, and meet you at London Airport at nine-thirty a.m."

"It's really rather a thrill," she breathed.

"More for you than for me, you crazy kid," he said grimly.

Not that that was strictly true. He had been in a slightly chaotic state of mind ever since those dormant feelings for Charlotte had sprung to light alternately to delight and torment him. But he fancied he had himself well under control again. Dammit! He was twelve years older than this pretty girl, who was still a minor. He ought to know better. Not that men of his age—and much older—didn't often marry young girls. But he had always thought it foolish.

When he lunched with his mother, he suddenly asked

her how much older than herself his father had been when they married. Ann Martin, with a quizzical look at him, answered:

"Five years. But what on *earth* put that into your mind?"

"Oh, nothing," he said casually and went on eating.

Again the sharp, questioning look from his mother's shrewd kindly eyes. But she said no more. She was the perfect mother, he reflected. She had, in fact, been angelic to him ever since Bridget died. Never possessive—only mildly inquisitive, as any woman might be. But she never pressed him to tell her things that he obviously didn't want to tell. And, as he had prophesied to Charlotte—when he told his mother that he was going away for a few days on business and that Joe Trewithin had agreed to come down and hold the fort, Mrs. Martin had merely said:

"Very well, dear."

That was all. What a jewel of a woman, he reflected. He was sure she was burning to know where he was going and why. Well, one day he would tell her, but just now he couldn't.

Then a new thought sprang to life somewhat unnerving him:

Supposing the Harveys put two and two together and when they find me not here they suspect that we've gone away together?

It was a somewhat worried and unsettled Luke who left the peaceful haven of St. Nevell on that night train from Redruth to Paddington.

Finally, an equally unsettled Charlotte found herself thirty thousand feet up in the air on her way to Nice.

When she had met Luke at London Airport, she felt almost embarrassed. The whole affair seemed so unreal.

Luke, in his lounge suit, looked unusually spick-and-span, dark curly hair slicked down, suitcase in hand. He explained he had to bring a change of clothing as it was sure to be very hot in the South of France, and he didn't want to wear a flannel suit all day. He had brought a sports shirt and some shorts.

"I intend to be thoroughly egotistical and hurl myself into the blue, blue sea while you tackle your grandparents," he said with a sidelong teasing look at her.

She laughed.

"I don't blame you."

Almost immediately he added:

"You know I'll be on hand if you want me but it'll be better for me not to go with you when you visit your grandfather. I intend to be just the strong arm in the background if and when you want to lean on it."

"I can't thank you enough," she said. "Dear Luke!"

When they were seated side by side in the Caravelle and the steward brought Luke a glass of sherry, they lapsed into a rather awkward silence. Charlotte felt remorseful because she had taken Luke away from his hard-working mother and the inn just at their busiest time. And Luke knew exactly what was making Charlotte look glum. She had told him she had had a difference of opinion with her adoptive parents, when she told them she was off to the South of France—and why. She certainly hadn't received their blessing. She looked today, Luke thought with tenderness, rather like a little girl in disgrace. Always so pretty; so delightfully dressed. He admired her pink silky suit, the white patent-leather bag, and sandals.

"You're much too elegant for me," he said.

He was inordinately pleased when she suddenly informed him that he need have no complexes about *his*

appearance. He was far and away the best-looking man in the aircraft.

"Nonsense. I feel out-of-date and rather like a stodgy uncle taking his pretty niece off for a holiday."

"I bet that's not what other people imagine when they look at us," was Charlotte's mischievous reply.

"What do you suppose they do imagine?" He smiled down at her.

"Big handsome tycoon with his secretary, perhaps."

"It's the first time I've been called a tycoon, love!"

"Who cares what anybody thinks, anyhow?" She shrugged her shoulders and lit a cigarette.

But Luke thought:

Her mind is full of the grandfather she's going to meet. That's her thrill. But mine is being here beside her trying, if she only knew it, not to believe that we are an uncle and niece, or a tycoon and typist, but two people in love. Yes, dammit, I'm in love with Charlotte, no matter what she feels about me. I was mad to come.

Certainly Charlotte had no idea of Luke's inner conflict. Neither did she even notice that he left most of his lunch. She attacked hers with the hunger of the young and healthy, and soon began to feel much better.

For the rest of the journey, she talked about St. Nevell, the pub, Mike, almost anything but the present critical situation. She tried not to remember her family, now on their way down to Cornwall without her. But she knew how deeply they would be feeling the fact that she was not with them. Daddy, in particular. He had looked so hurt when she told him exactly why she had backed out.

The journey was wonderfully short. Soon they were in Nice. Charlotte began to feel really alive and full of anticipation once the great French plane touched down on the gleaming tarmac. It was, as Luke predicted, very hot here.

The sky was an intense blue, like the mirror-calm sea. Quite apart from the reason for her visit Charlotte was thrilled at the sight of it all.

"I adore this coast. I haven't been here for ages."

Luke said nothing. He was passing through his own crisis. Once he would have done anything to avoid returning to the Côte d'Azur because he and Bridget had honeymooned there. Now that period of his life seemed so remote as to have been in another world.

He thought of his Irish bride; such a completely different type from the girl who was here with him today. Whereas Charlotte was a deeply passionate, impulsive person—half-child, half-woman—Bridget used to be the gentle, clinging type, wholly dependent upon him. He had always been the strong one; he had made all the decisions, and perhaps now, when he was older and after years of illness and frustration, he had lost some of that old desire to be the masterful one.

So brief had been his married life there had been no time for disillusionment, or passion's decline. He had loved his Bridget until death took her and their son away from him. But if he were to be factual, and could replace sentimental memory with the truth, he might guess that in time Bridget would have bored him. She had never had Charlotte's strong personality—Charlotte's fascination. When she loved it would surely be with a love that could equal any man's in strength and ardour. Luke, who had watched her in her adolescent years, down there in Cornwall, was certain of it. He knew to what heights she could rise, and how equally unhappy she could become. To possess wayward lovely Charlotte would be an enchantment for any man.

This journey to the South of France with her was at least teaching Luke one sure thing; that no one could go

on grieving for ever over a lost love; and that there was a lot of truth in the old saying that it was not good for man to live alone. *He needed love. He needed Charlotte.* He also realised that coming back did not hurt or disturb him in the way he had dreaded. He was able to remember that sweet honeymoon with Bridget as a youthful idyll—almost a dream. But with Charlotte today he was wide awake and tremendously stimulated. He fully realised, too, that the situation was dangerous and that whatever happened he must not let her know how he was feeling.

11

WITHIN an hour of reaching Le Trayas, Charlotte was on her way to the Villa Helios which was the address she had been given for Stanislaw Nagorski.

She was in such a state of wild excitement that she had refused to stay with Luke after drinking, quickly, a cup of strong black coffee at the Hotel Navirotal where they would stay the night.

Luke, as usual, had taken command. Giving her a quizzical, half-humorous, half-sad look from those fine, kindly eyes of his, he said:

"You are all het up and won't settle down until you've contacted your grandfather, so go ahead, love. I'll see to everything at the hotel."

'Seeing to everything' meant registering, making sure that the suitcases were sent up to their two rooms, and, for Luke, changing into more suitable attire for the Corniche D'Or, than that in which he had arrived. It was certainly hot down here.

Charlotte was glad of her dark glasses and the fact that she had changed into a short cotton frock, as she made her way towards the villa. She had been given directions by the hall-porter of the hotel. It was only five minutes' walk away from the sea.

Holding her white bag very tightly, the palms of her hands moist with nerves and heat, Charlotte kept saying to herself:

"I'm going to see my own grandfather . . . my *mother's*

father . . . someone I'm really directly related to. What a thrill!"

Forgotten were her *adoptive* parents. For a moment anyhow—like sad ghosts—John and Anthea Harvey slipped back into the shadows. Charlotte faced what she felt to be one of the greatest adventures of her young life. She was nervous but not afraid. Whatever he was like, she was determined to love this old man, and equally determined that he should like her. And he would lead her to her very own mother. *That* was the real joy of it.

When she had questioned the concierge, he had looked at her rather curiously, she thought, and said:

"Ah! The Villa Helios!—that is a small, modern villa, Mamselle, just to the left, up the road, away from the sea. I know the place. It is divided into two flats. I rather believe the Polish gentleman occupies the ground floor."

Charlotte found the villa without trouble. Modern and ugly. No white walls, or blazing Bougainvillaea, or any of the expected glamour of the Midi. But the weather lifted her spirits. The sun beat down from a blue, cloudless sky. The palm trees were green and glossy, and the sea had looked gorgeous when she first saw it from the hotel. Le Trayas was like a jewel, green with trees, and with lovely little coves along the rocky shore spoiled only by people. Charlotte and Luke had both remarked upon the long crawling line of traffic, the camping grounds, and the caravans, which were fast ruining the beautiful, graceful coast.

The windows of the lower flat in the Villa Helios were shuttered. For one awful moment Charlotte thought that the occupants were all out, or even away. She hadn't bothered to make enquiries before she came all this way as to whether or not Mr. Nagorski was in residence. Crazy, perhaps, to take it for granted that he was!

Her heart sinking, she knocked on the door. Then to

her relief she heard the yapping of a small dog and the next moment the door opened and a white miniature poodle ran out, barking. It was followed by a short, plump woman in her late forties, wearing a floral cretonne overall, legs bare, feet in rope-soled sandals. She had small, shrewd eyes, a mop of rather obviously dyed red hair, and too much rouge on her cheeks.

"*Tais-toi!*" she said in a high shrill voice, which Charlotte found as unpleasing as the little animal's, then, hands on hips, looked Charlotte up and down.

"*Vous désirez*, Mamselle —?"

"I—is this where Mr. Nagorski lives?" began Charlotte, her heart fluttering.

"*Oui*. You are Eenglish?"

"*Oui*, Madame."

"I speak Eenglish. I am Madame Nagorski."

For a horrified second of silence, Charlotte stared at the plump red-haired woman, asking herself if this could possibly be her grandmother, but realising immediately that it couldn't. She was far too young. Charlotte presumed that her grandmother was dead and that this was the second Mrs. Nagorski.

"You—you are Polish?" Charlotte stuttered, feeling rather stupid.

"No—French," the answer was snapped back.

"I—could I please see Mr. Nagorski?"

"He is in bed and seeck. He will not want to see you. Who are you, please, Mamselle?" The woman jerked her head up as she asked the question, eyeing Charlotte without friendliness.

Never had the girl felt more uncertain of herself. She almost wished she had brought Luke with her. She didn't know whether she ought to tell this woman who she was. She decided that she had better not. She stammered:

"I have come all the way from London to see Mr. Nagorski, Madame, on the most important business. I mean . . . I hope he isn't terribly ill but . . . if I could only see him just for a moment, please . . ." She broke off, swallowing.

Mrs. Nagorski shaded her eyes from the sun and stared at Charlotte, with that rather insolent up-and-down look which was frankly hostile. It was obvious she was not pleased to see this visitor but her curiosity got the better of her.

"*Je ne comprends pas* . . . but if you have come all the way from England to see my 'usband, you had better come in. It is too hot standing out here."

Relieved, Charlotte followed the woman into the hall where it was dim and cool. The whole flat was rather dark. The French keep the sun out of their rooms. Charlotte was too nervous and worried to be really critical of the interior of her grandfather's home but what she saw was scarcely prepossessing. Ugly, varnished furniture—a crude yellow floral carpet—cheap curtains. A forlorn-looking canary sat huddled in a too-small cage; there were some rather cheap-looking china ornaments on the mantelpiece, and dozens of framed photographs. It was all clean and tidy, but the place had a stuffy odour and seemed uninviting to Charlotte.

Now the woman began to question her, speaking ungrammatical but fluent English. She seemed determined to find out the reason for the young English lady's visit.

Mamselle must understand, she said, that her husband had been ill with heart trouble for six months now and the doctor had said he must be kept quiet. Couldn't she give him a message? What could Mamselle possibly want to see him about?

Charlotte was seized with an agony of indecision. What

ought she to do? If her grandfather had a bad heart, perhaps she should not confront him with past history—bring back to mind what must have been a tragedy? Ought she to harass him with her presence if he was ill? Oh, this was too terribly disappointing! Charlotte had built up such a glorious picture of her grandfather as a genial old man ready to open his arms to her and gather her into a warm embrace. She had also hoped against hope that her grandmother would be here, equally ready to acknowledge her grand-daughter.

She could almost wish that she had allowed the unshakable Vince to have done this job. She could see now what a mess an amateur detective could make of things. A situation like this needed caution and experience—very careful thinking about.

Hardly my line, Charlotte reflected with irony. Impulsive me!

At last, in desperation, she decided to confide in the second Mrs. Nagorski.

"Madame, this is very difficult and embarrassing for me, but I—I must ask you to be patient, and to help me."

"*Zut alors!*" the woman exclaimed. "What is it all about, Mamselle?"

The poodle jumped up at her, pulling at her skirt, whining for notice. She turned on him and pushed him off. He retired under the sofa where he found a ball which he chewed at resentfully.

Charlotte said:

"I—I presume the first Mrs. Nagorski is dead?"

"*Assurément*. She died six years ago—here in France. She and Stanislaw was in Nice with Polish cousins at the time. Sophie drop down dead . . . her 'eart." The woman struck her breast—then made the sign of the cross.

"I am sorry," whispered Charlotte.

"Did you know Sophie?"

"No, Madame, but I . . ."

"She was a decent woman," interrupted the second Mrs. Nagorski, "but always grumbling. Stanislaw was not happy. She made him misery."

"I am sorry," repeated Charlotte and felt suddenly rather sick and depressed. Nothing was turning out as she had hoped.

"Many is the time Stanislaw, he have told me how they fight, he and Sophie. They was not happy. He spoil her but he not spoil me," added the second Mrs. Nagorski spitefully. "All day, wash, scrub, clean, look after him, like I am a slave I work!" She sniffed and made one of the tossing movements of her dyed red head, which fascinated Charlotte.

Suddenly, as though cheered by the presence of the visitor, the poor little canary jumped on its perch and started to trill and twitter.

Immediately Mrs. Nagorski screamed, *"Tais-toi"* as she had done to the poodle, flung a cover over the cage and silenced the unhappy songster.

"That bird, he get on my nerves, I give him away."

Charlotte under ordinary circumstances would have offered to take the miserable canary—and the dog. She loved all animals. But her mind was full of her family now. She said:

"There—there was a daughter of the first marriage, was there not, Madame?"

Mrs. Nagorski's small shrewd eyes narrowed. She gave her a shrill laugh.

"A daughter. *Si, si, et comment!* There was a daughter, also called Sophie. Worse than her mother."

Charlotte's cheeks grew hot. She was conscious of an

absurd desire to defend the woman she had never seen or known just because she was her mother.

"How was she worse?" she demanded rather indignantly.

"What has it got to do with you, Mamselle?"

Charlotte felt floored—wondering what to say next—wanting to tell this woman who she was, yet somehow not daring to. It was quite obvious that she would be no more popular than her mother with this disagreeable creature.

Mrs. Nagorski gave Charlotte the up-and-down look, and pushed forward a chair.

"*Asseyez-vous,*" she said with grudging courtesy.

Feeling weak, Charlotte seated herself. Nervously she clasped and unclasped her white patent bag.

She disliked this stuffy, ugly little room. She disliked the woman who was married to her grandfather. She was sorry for the dog and the canary. But most of all she was sorry for herself. She felt rather as though she had been hit on the head and was momentarily stunned into silence.

Now Madame Nagorski sat down opposite her and began a tirade against her predecessor. Charlotte only half believed all that she was told but it was plain that the present Mrs. Nagorski had had no love for the first one. Charlotte heard the whole story of the sudden death of Sophie, then in her late fifties; of her extravagance while she was alive; of the way she nagged and complained, and of how Stanislaw, a retired architect, had had difficulty in pleasing, or providing for her. They had apparently been staying on holiday with their Polish cousin in Nice, when the coronary had carried Sophie off. Mrs. Nagorski related this with obvious satisfaction. She, Marcelle, was then a widow. Her husband had died in a car accident. She was the bosom friend of the Polish

cousin in Nice. She had met the bereaved Stanislaw at the time of his wife's death.

Six months later they married. This was *her* home, she told Charlotte. *Her* flat. Stanislaw had not wished to return to England to live, and been only too glad to sell up and join her here. She was sorry for him, his wife dying so suddenly and unexpectedly like that, and they were both lonely. He recognised her worth. The old fool had been fond of Sophie, even though she had led him into debt. (And so on and so on) . . . But now he knew what a good French wife was like.

Charlotte, her mind whirling, could hardly take in all the Frenchwoman was saying and the more she heard the more she disliked her. She began to wonder if her grandfather had not been rushed into this second marriage on the rebound, and perhaps regretted it. But she would never really know. She was for the moment only concerned with hearing more about her mother.

"You were telling me about the other Sophie—the daughter—" she began.

This brought a new stream of disapproval and criticism from Marcelle, who had become more hospitable, poured out two glasses of Cinzano and handed one to the young English girl. Marcelle still hadn't the slightest idea who her visitor was but seemed pleased to have someone to listen to her malicious and, at times, venomous account of Stanislaw's first wife and child.

Young Sophie, she announced, was once a nice girl but had disgraced herself at the start of her life and her poor father had never recovered from it.

Charlotte stared at her blankly.

"You mean Sophie, the daughter?"

"*Si, si* . . . I speak now of the daughter who was also called Sophie. She broke the heart of poor Stanislaw."

Charlotte felt quite faint. She gripped the sides of her chair very tightly, conscious that she was sweating.

"But . . . you mean . . . long ago?"

"Of course, when she was a young girl. Now she is only thirty-seven—ten years more young than me. *Trente-sept* . . . and as cool as you like, she is—*Mon Dieu* . . . she has a sauce, zis woman . . . making the objections when I marry her father. Not even did she come down to Nice to our wedding."

I'm not surprised, thought Charlotte.

"Always ze trouble with ze daughter for poor Stanislaw, like wiz ze mother. She put on airs . . . she think she is so beautiful and elegant. She don't bother with her father or me. I make Stanislaw show her the door five years ago. We no see her for five years."

Charlotte stood up.

"Why? What did she do that was so bad?"

Marcelle looked at her slyly.

"You know Sophie?"

"No—I—"

Again the woman interrupted:

"We have no address since Sophie marry again. Two times, she marry. The second is someone we not meet. The first to a Monsieur Collins. Willie, she call him. Stanislaw say he never right for Sophie. No man right for Sophie. She too like her muzzer. Extravagant—*egoiste*!"

Again a tirade against the older Sophie. In a state of utter confusion, Charlotte suddenly heard a man's voice—a querulous, husky voice with a strange foreign inflection, calling from a bedroom:

"Marcelle! Marcelle!"

"*Je viens!*" Mrs. Nagorski screamed back and rose to her feet. "That is *heem*. Always he call for me. I am only

a slave. Why I marry an old man who get seeck, I don't know."

Somewhat nauseated, Charlotte said:

"Please, Mrs. Nagorski, ask him if he will see me for a moment."

Marcelle closed one eye. With the other she looked at Charlotte a trifle malevolently.

"I tell you—my 'usband is seeck. Why you come special from England to see heem?"

"It's very personal—I—I want to speak to him alone," said Charlotte desperately.

At this, the woman stared and then burst into strident laughter.

"That is funny. You wan' to speak to my 'usband alone? What about? What beesiness you have with my 'usband? And you want to know where is Sophie? *Formidable, alors!* Sophie owe you money maybe. *Alors!* You must get it yourself. My 'usband 'ave no money for to pay his daughter's bills."

Before Charlotte could reply to this the bedroom door opened. She saw a small thin man with a bald head, graced by only a few scanty grey hairs at the back; a thin, yellowish-skinned face with rather mournful dark eyes, heavily browed, and a big beaky nose. He had a close-clipped grey beard. A curiously un-English face, she thought, and not a very attractive one. It was too narrow; and the bearded lips were discontented, even ill-tempered. He looked from Marcelle to the tall, beautiful, auburn-haired girl, then back at his wife.

"I've been calling for you —" he began in a querulous voice as though he had no interest in the visitor.

Charlotte's heart sank. Some of the bright pink flush of excitement drained from her face. This dark-eyed, disagreeable old man who wore a bright flowered towelling

dressing-gown that ill became his looks—was *he* her grandfather? Did *his* blood run in her veins? He spoke French with a curious accent. He was Polish, of course.

"Oh, *gosh!*" Charlotte muttered the word in dismay, using Michael's schoolboy epithet.

Marcelle gave a loud laugh and answered her husband in rapid French:

"Don't blame me for not running after you. I've been entertaining an English demoiselle who says she has come to see you on urgent business."

Stanislaw Nagorski blinked at Charlotte then rubbed his lips with the back of one bony hand.

"I am thirsty—I want a *citron-pressé—vite*—Marcelle," he whined.

The woman turned to Charlotte. She stood like a figure of stone, her fascinated gaze never leaving this man who was father to her *own* mother.

"Eh—*voilà*, Mamselle. As you see, my 'usband is more interested in a drink than a visitor . . ." She laughed stridently.

Charlotte began to shake nervously.

"Please—let me speak to him alone."

Madame Nagorski narrowed her gaze. Her nostrils flared.

"So—there is a secret I must not share with my 'usband. Zis is not nice—not nice at all, Mamselle."

Suddenly Charlotte hated the Frenchwoman with her dyed hair, her ugly expression and her nasty mind. She lost her temper.

"Madame, you may as well know the truth then. I—I am Monsieur Nagorski's grand-daughter. I have come to ask for my—my mother's address."

Having dropped this bombshell into the dreary little salon where the canary was muffled and the poodle still

hid under the sofa, silence followed. Charlotte's heart raced madly and she went on staring at her grandfather, not quite sure how her information would be received, but certain that she was showing neither the subtlety nor the caution that Mr. Vincent would have brought to bear on such a delicate situation.

Marcelle turned a claret colour. She looked as though she was going to have a stroke. The old man seemed not to have heard—or understood. He went on nagging his wife, upbraiding her because he was allowed to remain thirsty. Charlotte, stunned by the way in which her announcement had been received, and with a sharp physical pain in her heart, cried out to the old man:

"Mr. Nagorski—Grandfather—I am your daughter Sophie's child. You must remember—she had a baby twenty years ago—who was adopted. I am that child. I found out about it and I want to find my—my mother. I managed to trace you here. I beg your pardon if I'm intruding on your life—not welcome and so on—I understand . . ." She was stammering pitifully. "But I had to come. You don't know how much I've wanted to find s-someone in my own family . . . like you."

Again, silence.

Stanislaw Nagorski stared at the girl with his mournful, Pekingese eyes, his heavy brows twitching. He looked stupid, as though he neither understood nor wished to. He turned to his wife.

"What is she saying, Marcelle? What does she mean?"

"You speak better English than I do—you should know," said Marcelle. The first shock was over for her. She looked astonished but rather more amused. "Grandfather," she added, and her shoulders shook with laughter. "*Bon Dieu!* So you have a nice, red-headed English grand-daughter, Stan. Sophie's mistake. *Alors!*

This demoiselle is the little mistake your Sophie produced twenty years ago to disgrace you all. She has come to find her family. It is *formidable. Fantastique!* I have not been so amused for years. Most certainly it is a change from the dull life I have been leading since I make *my* mistake and marry *you.*"

The venom in her voice appalled Charlotte. She had not known such an unpleasant woman existed. And those words—*mistake* . . . *disgrace* . . . equally appalled her. They seemed to spatter mud all over her beautiful, clean sweet dreams. Her enraptured belief that she would find a dear benevolent old gentleman—a gallant, one-time pilot of the Polish Air Force—decorated for bravery . . . ready to draw her into the warmth of his embrace and share with her a happiness, a richness, that had been lost and denied to them all these years. Instead—*this*—a woman who slyly insulted her *and* her mother, and an old man who either had no interest in her or had not yet taken in the fact that she *was* his flesh and blood.

It was a crushing blow. Charlotte, reeling under it, was for a moment tempted to turn and rush out of the villa without that address she had come all this way to get. The tears swam in her eyes. She stood there, trying not to burst into sobs, trying to preserve her pride in front of the detestable Frenchwoman and scarcely less detestable old man.

Then Marcelle shrilled:

"*Eh bien,* Stan—what do you say? Have you heard, *mon cher*—this is your *petite fille*? At least so she say. I presume she has proof."

"Yes," whispered Charlotte, "I have brought papers—I have proof."

Marcelle held out her hand and jerked her chin

upwards in a typically French gesture more eloquent than words. Charlotte gave her the documents, the top one being the essential letter from the Martlett Adoption Society, naming Sophie Nagorski as the mother of the baby.

Without any enthusiasm at all now, Charlotte watched the woman read it, which she did, asking now and again for Charlotte to translate a particular word which she did not understand. Then the red head shot up and the badly-painted, disagreeable face creased into a smile that held little humour. Marcelle sneered at her husband:

"Well, well—it's all here—the girl's right," she said in French. "She is your grand-daughter all right, Stan. *Alors!* Your dear daughter really has got something coming to her now. I can't see her being pleased if she is to be claimed as a *maman* by this big English girl. I can't say she look like Sophie, either, but I dare say the father was tall and fair. Eh?"

Old Nagorski seemed not to take in what his wife had said. He scratched his ear and shook his head.

"I don't understand —" he began.

"You don't understand anything," broke in Marcelle viciously. "You're a silly old fool but let me make it plain, *mon cher*, I'm not letting you offer Sophie any help now *or* her *bâtarde* . . ." She used the name with a malice that Charlotte found shocking, and which to her was a knock-out blow. She trembled violently. She felt cold and scared. Suddenly she snatched the papers out of Mrs. Nagorski's hand.

"Give them back. I—I assure you I don't want to stay here, or ask for any money, or—or anything. You've got it all wrong. It's horrible of you!"

Suddenly the old man seemed to become aware of the

tall, fair girl with the angry tears in her eyes. He peered at her short-sightedly.

"Wait a moment . . . let me look at you, *ma p'tite*."

But Charlotte backed away from him. She felt that the last person she wished to see now or have anything to do with, was her grandfather. She said, wildly:

"No, thank you. I know I'm not wanted. I don't want to stay here. Please just give me . . . my mother's address and let me go."

Nagorski looked vague and stupid. There was a day when he had been a sharp, bright young man with a good war record. He had been a good architect, too. But that was long ago. Both his marriages had been failures. His own daughter had turned from him and his present wife was creating a world in which there was nothing but misery. He was a sick man and rapidly losing his grip on life. But for a moment it was the younger Stanislaw Nagorski who came forward and gripped Charlotte by the arm and stared at her with avid curiosity.

"Sophie's baby . . . my grand-daughter . . . Fine-looking girl . . . very fine! How did it all happen? How did you hear about me . . . about Sophie?"

Charlotte looked as though she was about to answer but Marcelle speedily put an end to the approach that her husband had made to the girl. She was terrified that her husband would part with a single franc to anybody but herself. She snapped in French:

"You go back to bed. The girl's right. She'd better get out. Give her Sophie's address and be done with it, Stan."

But now Charlotte's natural kindness and warmth of heart led her to make a gesture towards the miserable old man.

"I'd like to get to know you better, Grandfather —" she began.

Marcelle interrupted with her strident laugh.

"Get to know him better and you find yourself cooking for heem, like me. You no run away with idea he want nothing but reunion with you. You get back where you come from. I know there is last address we receive from your mother. I find it for you."

Charlotte looked at her grandfather. Without this horrible woman, he *might* have been nicer, she thought; this visit might not have turned out so badly. But Nagorski had sunk back into his former apathy, and began to nag his wife for his *citron-pressé* again. He seemed once more quite disinterested in the English girl who claimed such close relationship with him.

Marcelle rummaged in a drawer, then wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to Charlotte.

"*Voilà!* We no see Sophie for five years. And I no think you get pleasant reception. But you try. And—just tell her *we* no want her here, in case she get the feeling she like to see her papa again."

With trembling fingers Charlotte took the piece of paper and stared at it through her tears.

Sophie Collins,
14 Mill House Street,
Putney, S.W.

"Thank you," she said in a choked voice.

Her mother's address at last. She had got it and she felt no elation—only a deadly feeling of utter disappointment.

She dragged her gaze from the sorry spectacle of the old man trying to relight his half-smoked cigarette; taking

no notice of her whatsoever. It was obvious to her that he had no desire to further their acquaintanceship, or dared not because of the woman he was married to.

Charlotte put the address in her bag, turned and ran out of the room and out of the Villa Helios.

She heard the poodle yapping as she went.

12

"My poor Charlotte—poor love!"

Luke kept saying these words over and over again. He held tightly on to Charlotte's hand. She was pressing a handkerchief against her lips with the other. She had been crying like a heartbroken child and he was heartbroken for her. With his deep understanding of human nature and particularly of those who suffered, he knew what a bitter blow her visit to her grandfather had been.

To some people it might not have seemed such a tragedy. A harder person might have minimised it—thought it unimportant. But he knew perfectly well how much it meant to Charlotte. She had counted on this visit. She had been so radiant when she left him. She had come back, her shocked face stained with tears.

They were sitting together now in the cool attractive lounge of the hotel. Everybody else was out. They were alone. Luke had had a pleasant afternoon in the sea, and felt as fit as he looked. He could not bear Charlotte's misery.

"He didn't want me—he didn't even bother to try and get to know me. I think he was a bit senile. Much older than I'd expected. Or perhaps he'd had a stroke or something. Anyhow, he wasn't really 'with it', and that horrible Frenchwoman he's married to—you'd have loathed her, Luke. She was the *end*."

"Poor love!" said Luke again and pressed Charlotte's hot fingers. She had been shaking violently. With deep

pity he looked at the bowed auburn head. He could easily have reminded her that she had been warned not to start this search. Even that fellow, Vince, the detective, had warned her. Luke tried to restore her confidence.

"What's it matter if the old man has married a bad type? Or, really, what *he* is like? It's your mother you want. One can't expect to like one's grandparents, necessarily. I never met mine but I can quite well imagine they couldn't have been all that wonderful."

She looked up at him, blowing her nose forlornly.

"You're saying that to comfort me."

"Not at all —" His eyes narrowed with tender laughter. "I always tell you, you're too romantically minded. It's jolly nice to imagine that one springs from marvellous stock and has noble adoring grandparents. But as far as I remember, my own mother once told me that *her* mother was a most difficult unprepossessing woman."

Charlotte tried to laugh. She took the cigarette Luke handed her. Dear Luke! Always such a comfort, she thought. So practical, too.

"It was a horrid little villa," she said with a sigh, but on a less dramatic note. "The only things I liked in it were the poor little canary that wasn't allowed to sing and the miserable poodle that looked as though no one ever played with it."

"Never mind, love, you got the address you came here for. That's the main thing. You ought to be satisfied."

"They didn't have one nice thing to say even about my mother."

"From what you tell me she didn't get on with her father. She's probably a lot nicer than he is and has washed him and his new wife out of her hair."

Charlotte brightened considerably.

"You've got something there."

"Forget Monsieur and Madame Nagorski," Luke counselled her. "Just consider your next move."

"Luke," she said, "I had anticipated that I—I'd like my grandfather and be asked to stay, perhaps, and spend a little time with him. As things have turned out, couldn't we go home right away?"

He raised his brows.

"You mean—at once?"

"Yes—if we could exchange our tickets for the night flight. I don't mind paying the bill at the hotel but I—well, the sooner I get back to London, the better."

He felt curiously depressed. It was pretty wonderful to him, being here in the South of France with his darling Charlotte, but he could see it meant little to her, really, being with him. Despite the bitterness of her disappointment over her grandfather, it hadn't put her off. He must hand it to her, he thought admiringly. She was not down and out but ready to take another gamble.

"So you haven't had enough?" he said. "You want to risk another let-down?"

"You said just now that my mother was probably nicer than her father," said Charlotte quickly. "So why should it necessarily be another let-down?"

"You're quite right," nodded Luke, "I am arguing against myself. Perhaps it's just because I'm loving it here in the sun on this golden coast, so much. And I hoped to give you dinner in La Napoule tonight and pretend we were having the helluva fine party."

She put out a hand impulsively.

"Oh, darling Luke, I'd have liked that, too. And I love being here with you. But I think we ought to try and get home—not only so that I can go at once to this address they gave me, but because—well—we oughtn't really to be here together at all, ought we?"

"You're right again," he said with a short laugh, and stood up and jammed his cigarette-end down in an ash-tray. He felt suddenly cross, not with her but with himself for even hoping she might share his foolish enthusiasm over being in Le Trayas with her.

Charlotte sensed that she had upset him. She, too, got up. She put one long slender hand on his shoulder and looked up into his sun-browned face.

"Luke—am I being very selfish? Would it be awful of me to drag you back to England tonight?"

He pulled away from her hand and bowed with exaggerated courtesy.

"*Chère Mademoiselle*—I am your guest and you are entitled to extend or curtail the length of my visit here just as you wish."

Her cheeks flushed.

"You're being horrid all of a sudden."

"I'm sorry, love."

"We'll wait till tomorrow if you prefer that."

"No, I'll cut along to the telephone and ring the airport right now and see if we can get on the night plane."

She put out a hand again and pulled him back.

"Luke—why are you cross with me?"

The nearness of her, the faint perfume from her hair, the flushed appealing face with those long lashes still wet from her recent tears, weakened him. It was always the same for him where Charlotte was concerned. Strong man though he was, there was something about her that went straight to his heart—and to his senses as he had recently discovered.

Suddenly, roughly, he caught her in his arms.

"You're such a little idiot and I love you so crazily. That's the whole damned trouble. I'm in love with you,

Charlotte. I can't think of anything or anybody else and naturally I don't want to catch the damned night flight home. So now you know!"

She was so astounded that for a moment she did not move but stood staring up at him, her eyes brilliant, incredulous. She felt the strong beat of his heart against her breast, the tension of his arms pulling her closer. Then the pressure of his lips against her mouth. She had no time to think. Scarcely time to feel more than a second of desire to return that kiss, and to respond to the strength and warmth of his arms. It was certainly the first time any man had kissed her quite that way.

That it should be *Luke* . . . that was what surprised her so utterly. And taken by such surprise she could do nothing but lean against him, her lips moving under his, her pulses racing with the wild delight of awakened passion—of feelings far removed from the old platonic affection she used to feel for him.

It was Luke who drew back suddenly and let her go. The blood was draining from his face. He was shaking. He groped in his pocket for another cigarette.

"Sorry, love, the heat down here must have gone to my head. Let's ring for a cool drink, shall we, or would you rather I went straight to the telephone?"

She was quite unable to recover her equilibrium with the same speed. And she was quite unsure of her emotions. She gave a rather hysterical little laugh.

"Really, Luke—*honestly*!"

"I agree," he said and thrust a packet of cigarettes at her. "Have one."

She shook her head. She was calming down but her lips tingled from the recent pressure of his. Her thoughts were chaotic.

"You said that you—*loved* me!"

"Off my head, darling—I've just told you. That's what the *Corniche d'Or* can do to a chap."

She tried to laugh.

"Oh—I see."

"Of course I do love you," he added more easily, "but I'd no right to kiss you like that."

She put her handkerchief up to her lips and wiped them carefully.

"I didn't seem to mind, did I? Incidentally, have you smeared my lipstick all over my face?"

"No, not at all. You look as charming as ever."

He congratulated himself upon being able to speak and behave with normality.

God! he thought, what a fool to have let his feelings for this girl run away with him to such an extent. She was being very sweet about it but he had probably made a complete mess of their friendship. What a *fool*!

Charlotte said:

"Do you really love me, Luke?"

His gaze flickered and fell before hers.

"You know I do. I've done so for ages—ever since you were a silly little teenager always getting into scrapes and coming to me to be comforted."

"I'm still getting into scrapes and coming to you for comfort," she reminded him.

"That doesn't excuse me from ruining your make-up, darling."

She looked at him uncertainly. He had swung with incredible rapidity from lover to friend again but something deep down in her wanted to make sure she did not hurt him—did not allow him to be really sorry for that kiss. How she would have felt about him if he had gone on kissing her, she didn't really know. She was in too much confusion of mind to try and analyse it. She only knew

that he was inexpressibly dear to her, and always would be.

"You're being flippant," she said in a low voice, "but it's a bit difficult for me to ignore the fact that you did say that you were in love with me and that you couldn't think of anybody else, and I'd just like you to know that I —" She broke off.

His face hardened.

"Forget it," he snapped.

"Why?"

He stared at her for a moment, surprised.

"You don't *want* to remember it, do you?"

"I don't know, Luke. I'm all mixed-up."

"Well—I say—forget it," he repeated. "We're both mixed-up kids at the moment. Only I'm not all that much of a kid. I'm twelve years old than you and I ought to know better. I shouldn't have said what I did."

"That's absurd, if you meant it."

"Oh, for God's sake," he began furiously, then counted ten under his breath and started again on a quieter note: "Look, Charlotte darling, whether I'm in love with you or not isn't relevant. I flew over here with you to help you find your mother's address. You've got it, so now we can go back and you can carry on with your search. You're quite right about not staying here tonight. It's no longer necessary. I'll apologise to the hotel and settle the bill and we'll push off—that is if we can get on to the night flight! We were lucky with cancellations in London so we might be in Nice."

Charlotte hesitated. She was very conscious of the fact that she hadn't minded Luke kissing her with such passion, and that she had even enjoyed it. But whether or not she was in love with him—that she did not know. It was impossible to make up her mind about such a thing

so quickly. In any case, Luke seemed to want to brush it off as a momentary loss of control on his part, so she must take her cue from him. She said:

"Okay, Luke. Go and ring the airport."

He turned but once again she put out a hand and pulled him back, acting on one of her warm generous impulses.

"Luke, I adore you. You know that. Please don't let . . . what happened just now . . . make the slightest difference to our friendship."

"Of course it won't," he said lightly, "but I'd be obliged if you'd try and stop being so attractive—will you, love?"

He was the old friendly easy-going Luke. As she watched him walk away she reflected that she *did* adore him, and it had really been rather wonderful in his arms just now. How fantastic! Luke in love with her! *Luke* behaving like a passionate boy instead of the old practical, platonic Luke.

Then as her fingers searched in her bag for her powder-compact, they came in touch with the slip of paper which Madame Nagorski had given her. She lifted it out and looked at it again.

Sophie Collins . . . Putney . . .

Her mother! She could go back to London to 14 Mill House Street, Putney, and trace her now. And, as Luke himself had said, she would probably turn out to be much nicer than her horrid old grandfather. Charlotte was not going to be disappointed a second time. She felt sure of it.

All thoughts of Luke went out of her mind. Heart and soul she became engrossed again in the thought of finding her mother.

13

ONCE again, despite the fact that it was the height of the season, Charlotte and Luke were lucky about the tickets. They got on to the night-flight from Nice.

The atmosphere between them was a trifle strained. Despite Charlotte's ever-growing excitement at the thought of seeing her mother, she could not forget what had happened in the hotel at Le Trayas.

When they were side by side in their tilted-back seats; lights dimmed; the stewardess moving quietly up and down the aisle like a nurse watching over her patients in the ward, Charlotte remembered . . .

Now and again she stole a brief glance at Luke, but he was asleep. She was learning about men, she thought wryly. He was possibly much more emotionally disturbed than she was at the moment. But he could sleep. And he had eaten well—enjoyed that gorgeous dinner they had at the *Restaurant Mère-Terras* in La Napoule before they drove to Nice. Charlotte had not felt hungry.

She was finding out quite a lot about herself, too, that she had not known before. A few facts about her essential femininity, those sex-instincts (which possibly even in Anthea Harvey's day were not often discussed), but about which Charlotte and her friend Emma spoke freely. When Emma first went away to live in Rome with her artist, Charlotte had been a little surprised that a girl like Emma, reasonably controlled and sensible, could fling her cap over the mill for this thing called 'love'. And in Emma's

case it really had been love—not merely sex. But the Charlotte of a year ago had never experienced more than the youthful fleeting passion she had felt for Julian—*her* artist—down in St. Nevell. But she could remember vividly how little she had really enjoyed being touched by him even on the cheek, the hand, or her hair. And she would never have let him kiss her as Luke had done.

She was a more mature Charlotte today. Despite all Luke's teasing reminders of her adolescent moods, she was wholly aware now of herself as a woman. And it was Charlotte, the woman, who had responded so ardently to Luke's embrace.

Yet she could not swear that she was in love with him—as Emma was with her Italian, for instance. Nor that she was ready for the complete devotion and possession that a man like Luke would want to give. So it troubled her when her thoughts returned to him. And being purely female she was a little nettled because he was so cool and self-controlled again. He had drawn away from her. They were back on the old platonic basis and their dinner had been quite gay. But she had been aware of the fact that Luke was not himself; that there was a restlessness in his eyes, and the movements of his hands. And that in those fine searching eyes of his there was a new look of pain—of bafflement. It distressed her.

However, she knew that there was nothing she could do about it just now. She lay there, dozing, but far too mentally awake for comfort, until they touched down at London Airport. She was almost relieved when Luke suggested they should not breakfast together.

"I shall catch the early train down to St. Nevell after I've taken you back to Alexandra Square," he said.

"You don't need to come all that way," she began. But she had not been allowed to protest. He rode in the

taxi with her, and just before they reached her home, he said:

"Well, it's been an exciting twenty-four hours, I must say! I'm glad you got that address, even if you didn't like the old man."

Charlotte patted her bag, knowing that her mother's address was securely in it.

"But I've still got to find her, haven't I? She's married again five years ago, you know, and they didn't know her new name. I've just got to keep my fingers crossed that *someone* will know who she married, and give me a lead."

"I'd stay and help you if I didn't think I ought to go back to the pub. Joe is only obliging me and I know he doesn't want to hang on too long."

"I absolutely understand. You've been terrific to have given me so much of your time. I can't thank you enough, Luke!"

The taxi turned into Alexandra Square—deserted at this early hour. It was not a fine morning; dull, and cooler than the day they had left England; very much colder than it had been in the South of France. Charlotte found herself shivering. Luke's brown face looked pale and tired, she thought, despite the sleep he had had on the flight. Suddenly she held out a hand to him.

"Luke—darling, I'm so grateful but I feel somehow that you are losing patience with me —" she began.

He interrupted almost fiercely.

"Don't be a little idiot."

She grimaced.

"I wonder how many times you've said that!"

He kept a tight check on his feelings.

"I expect I'll say it a good many more. Well, love—good-bye for now. The best of luck in your visit to this address and let me know the result."

"Of course. I'll phone you."

"And don't go alone this time, for goodness' sake. Get your detective to do it, or what are you paying him for?"

"That's what he said. Yes—I'll put Mr. Vince on to the search today. Meanwhile, what you've just said about paying him, reminds me that I still owe you a hundred pounds."

"Well, don't remind me. And now, jump out, love. I must take this taxi back to Paddington."

He took the two hands she had held out and kissed each in turn, lightly.

"Good luck," he said again. "Don't get yourself in too much of a state."

She felt a constriction of the throat that prevented her from answering. But in that moment it seemed to her that he was inexpressibly dear, and that she did not want him to leave her. But she got out of the taxi and slammed the door. He waved to her, smiling rather grimly, she thought. Then he was gone.

She felt miserable as she let herself into the house and went in search of Old Fish; ready for a cup of strong coffee.

She knew it was no good ringing the detective agency until ten o'clock. She tried to put Luke and that grim smile of farewell out of mind. She couldn't let the thought of him disturb her too much. She had sworn that she would let nothing come between her and her essential desire to find her mother.

She roused the old nurse who seemed relieved to see Charlotte back again. Then the girl had a hot bath and changed into a warmer dress. The house really did seem horribly cold after Le Trayas and all that burning sunlight. It was desolate, too; so quiet and gloomy without the family. She missed her adoptive parents and the

brother who was no real brother but still her much-loved Mike. She wished he were here, gay, cheerful, knowing nothing about her drama, and that she could hear him shouting:

"Hi, Lottie! How's yourself?"

How terribly things had changed in this place, she reflected, and shivered as she looked around her familiar bedroom, then sat down to brush her hair.

It was not a little disturbing to find that her thoughts kept turning back to Luke, and to that moment of passion in the Hotel Navirotal.

There were quite a few things that disturbed Charlotte that morning of return to London. It even irritated her, as well, to feel how much she missed Mummy and Daddy. Her brain no longer registered memories of any row or misunderstanding she used to have with her adoptive mother. She could only think of all the affection and happiness she had known with them—especially with Daddy. As for that horrid old man in Le Trayas, what about those *other* grandparents she had once believed to be her own?

A silver-framed photograph of Lady Craven stood on the top of her writing-bureau by the window. The tall, proud, imperious woman who used to be a member of the Hunt sat side-saddle on her favourite mare, elegant and beautiful, as Charlotte best remembered her. Absolutely devoted both to her and to Michael. The most generous woman in the world.

The enlarged snapshot was signed:

'For my darling Charlotte from her devoted Grannie.'

Charlotte, restless, assailed by a dozen new doubts and apprehensions, picked up the photograph and stared at it intently.

"Oh, Grannie," she whispered. "How you would have

hated my *real* grandfather. He wasn't kind and charming and full of knowledge—like Grandpa. Grannie, why weren't you *really* my grandmother? Oh, how I wish you were here! Perhaps if you'd been alive to comfort and advise me I'd never have started on this ghastly search for my mother!"

Was that what it was becoming? she wondered uneasily as she put the photograph down again. *A ghastly search?*

She tried to forget all the unpleasant things Marcelle Nagorski had said about her step-daughter. *I mustn't be put off*, Charlotte thought. *I mustn't.*

She refused to discuss details with Miss Fish while she ate her breakfast, sitting in the kitchen with the old nurse. She satisfied her curiosity by saying that she had seen her grandfather, but that he was a very sick man and she had hardly talked to him. And that she hoped today to be in touch with her mother.

"Huh!" was Fish's only comment but her darting look of disapproval at the young girl spoke volumes.

The old woman's lack of support irked Charlotte. She finished her breakfast and went upstairs to write a long letter to Emma. But she tore it up, remembering that she had promised Mummy not to say a word to anybody—even her closest friend.

It was a depressed and frustrated Charlotte who finally telephoned to the ever-hearty Mr. Vince.

"I was going to go to Mill House Street alone but I think you had better come with me," she said.

"Certainly, Miss Harvey. But you seem to have done quite well by yourself so far. Jolly good, making this contact. How was the grandpapa?"

"Rather disappointing," said Charlotte, her lips tightening, "but don't let's discuss him. He's married again and his wife was frightful."

"I didn't expect you back until tomorrow."

"No, but—I saw no object in staying out there," said Charlotte, and tried not to think about Le Trayas—or Luke.

But she was in a state of acute nervousness and indecision and she felt that she really could not face a long morning by herself in the empty house, trying to kill time.

"Mr. Vince," she said on impulse. "Pick me up in your car and let me come with you to Putney."

"Certainly, delighted. You're quite the young detective yourself, if I may say so, Miss Harvey," said Vince with his booming laugh. "Let me know if you ever want a job. Nothing like a good lady detective."

Charlotte gave a weak laugh in return and put down the telephone.

She had to wait impatiently for another hour—Vince had an appointment at the office—then he called for her and they drove away from the Fulham Road towards Putney.

Vince had come armed with a map of London and had pinpointed Mill House Street. It led off one of the better-known turnings to the west of Putney Hill, he told Charlotte. It was, in fact, a No Through Road, a terrace of small modern houses built in Georgian style with tiny front gardens. Not a bad district, he told Charlotte. Quite pricey, too.

Charlotte felt no elation over this. She was beginning to be apprehensive about her family's background. She had never been a snob and it didn't matter to her whether they had a thousand pounds in the bank or nothing so long as they were pleasant and compatible. But her experience in Le Trayas had destroyed some of her former childish faith that everything would be marvellous. She was today hoping against hope that her mother would

turn out to be really nice. The rest she must leave to chance.

When she found herself outside number 14 in Mill House Street, her heart began to beat fast, as it had done before she rang the bell of the Villa Helios. But she told herself not to be stupid—she certainly would not find her mother here. She had probably left five years ago when she married again.

There was a faint drizzle falling. Charlotte wore a mac and scarf and had an umbrella with her. She was quite glad, too, that the big rubicund detective with his R.A.F. moustache was with her. He gave her confidence.

"Leave everything to me," he said.

A youngish woman answered the bell at number 14. She wore slacks and a shirt and her blonde hair was tied back with a bow. She was drying her hands as though she had been washing up. She looked nice, Charlotte thought. Her voice was educated.

"Mrs. William Collins—no, no! I'm Mrs. Grant. My husband and I own this house now."

"I realise that it no longer belongs to Mrs. Collins," smiled Vince. "Actually, she married again about five years ago. No doubt she sold the place to you."

"No. We bought it from some people called Pimm. George and Vicky Pimm. He was with a firm in London but was moved to Walsall, and had to sell the house suddenly. It was just right for my husband and me."

Charlotte, who had been listening intently, sighed. Another disappointment. But Vince seemed undismayed. He made notes in a diary and continued:

"Walsall—near Birmingham. Yes, yes, I see. Could you give me Mr. Pimm's address?"

Mrs. Grant looked at Charlotte curiously, then back at Vince.

"It's raining. Perhaps you'd like to come in —"

"No, no, thanks —" It was Charlotte who answered. "We won't bother you. It's just the address we want. Mr. —the Pimms—are sure to know what happened to Mrs. Collins—the original owner. They would have bought the house from her."

"Sure," Mrs. Grant smiled back. "Hang on a jiffy."

She turned back into her small hall and came out again after a moment or two with an envelope which she gave to Charlotte.

"Sorry to be so long. I'm not very tidy. I had to look through a pile of papers for the last letter we had from the Pimms. Mrs. Pimm and I rather liked each other, actually, and we *have* exchanged visits. There—this is where the Pimms are now. You can check the phone number."

Charlotte nervously looked at the writing on the envelope.

Verrydown, Aldwych Avenue, Walsall.

More delay, she thought, but one step nearer her mother, perhaps. As Mrs. Grant had just said—the Pimms had bought this house from Sophie Collins. Doubtless *they* could put Charlotte in touch with her mother.

Vince seemed as cheerful as Charlotte as they drove away from Putney.

"We're getting on fine. It's now a quarter to twelve. I've got to meet a client after lunch, Miss Harvey, but I'll be at your service later this afternoon and we can contact Walsall."

"Could I go back to the office with you and phone Walsall from there and speak, myself, to this Mrs. Pimm?"

"By all means. And if she isn't in—leave a message with that gum-chewing female who calls herself my secretary, and I'll get on to Walsall for you later tonight."

Sitting alone at Vince's desk in the absence of the boss, Charlotte spoke to Mrs. Pimm in Walsall. She was lucky. The woman was at home. Charlotte at once announced the reason for her call.

"I've just called at 14 Mill House Street in London. I believe you lived there once. Mrs. Grant gave me your telephone number. Well, the Mrs. Collins who sold the house to you is—is a relative of mine. I'm trying to get in touch with her. Do you know where I could find her, and what her present name is? It's five years since we were in touch . . ." Charlotte crimsoned as she uttered all these fabrications . . . "I expect you know she married again?"

Mrs. Pimm seemed affable and accommodating. Once more Charlotte was in luck. Mrs. Pimm knew all about the widowed Sophie's wedding.

"Your aunt—or cousin—or whoever she is—actually got married the week before she handed number 14 over to us. She was so sweet—she asked us to the wedding and my husband couldn't go but I did. It was at the Registrar's—I remember it particularly because Mrs. Collins looked pretty. She has—or rather had at that time—a gorgeous figure. She wore a pale violet three-piece—it suited her dark hair and olive skin . . ."

Mrs. Pimm rambled on—obviously loquacious and willing to chat. Charlotte listened, enraptured. This was the first moment that she could feel happy—and unutterably relieved. For Vicky Pimm was saying all the things Charlotte most wanted to hear—*nice* things about her mother. How pretty, how smart, how charming she was. And at long last Charlotte was able to bring the image of her mother to life. Slim, dark-haired, olive-skinned with a faintly foreign look, Mrs. Pimm said, but very English in her speech, and every other way. And she had been so pleasant to deal with over the house and so generous

about curtains and carpets. And the Pimms had felt it was so sad that the former husband, Bill Collins, had died suddenly, of a heart attack, like that, leaving poor Sophie a widow. But she had plenty of pluck and gumption, and she had bought a little dress shop in Brighton. She'd got married again just before she moved. Now she lived in a little flat over her business on the Brighton front. Her new name was Richards—Mrs. Richards. Her husband was younger than she was but seemed crazy about her, and she adored him. Vicky was sure they must be happy. Not that she'd seen them since the wedding, but she always sent a Christmas card and notices about her various Sales, and kept asking Vicky to go down to Brighton and see them. But somehow the Pimms had never got there. (Etc., etc.)

As a rule, Charlotte would have been bored by so much babbling about nothing. But this was not really 'nothing' to her. This was tremendous stuff. Real live news *about her mother.*

It was a madly excited girl with new hope burning in her breast who spoke to Vince later that afternoon at the Agency.

"I know her new name and I've got THE address at last!" she told him breathlessly, holding out the notes she had made on his pad.

He looked at them. SOPHIE RICHARDS LTD. BOUTIQUE. KINGS ROAD, BRIGHTON. A telephone number. A few directions that Sophie had sent Mrs. Pimm and which Vicky passed on to Charlotte.

SOPHIE RICHARDS LTD. was situated between the Queen's Hotel and the Royal Albion. Easy to find.

Vince looked up at Charlotte—noting rather regretfully those brilliant excited eyes, the carnation pink cheeks; the air of happy triumph. Ye gods, he thought. All that

ardour for a mother she had never known and who had probably forgotten she ever existed. What a waste! What a sad thing, really. Charlotte Harvey could start ringing bells, but Vince was too old a hand at this sort of thing to crow before the final victory. Second-hand news from some woman who hadn't seen Mrs. Richards for years—pretty unreliable! He still feared for his impetuous young client.

He talked to her in his best fatherly fashion for half an hour before he persuaded her to 'hold her horses' and let him nip down to Brighton first thing tomorrow morning and make the initial enquiries.

"Look—I've got to earn my money," he said with a grin, "besides which I'd just like to test the lie of the land. No, I promise I won't reveal a thing to your mother. Nothing *at all*. I can be a cunning old fox when I want. I'll nose around in my own way. I can at least find out a few things about Mrs. Richards and her husband before you rush into her arms. You'll be bound to come as a bit of a shock to her. You realise that, don't you—whichever way things work out."

Charlotte bit her lower lip and sighed. She was being continually flung between joy and misery, she thought. It was all very exhausting to a girl. She'd be a psychological 'case' before she'd finished. However, she could blame no one but herself. And she no longer felt hostile towards her adoptive parents. Since she met her grandfather, Nagorski, she had felt strangely reluctant to indulge in the resentment she had first felt towards Anthea. So much so that she telephoned her that night, as well as Luke. To Luke, first of all, after ten o'clock when he wouldn't be fully occupied in the bar.

"Mr. Vince is going to nose round and make some enquiries about my mother and tell me before I go down

there," she told him, after describing the way in which she had eventually rounded up the elusive Sophie.

"My, my! You're learning patience and caution," came from Luke dryly.

"I suppose so."

"So much the better, love, and I commend Mr. Vincent for not letting you rush your fences."

"All the same—what does he suppose he'll find out? Mrs. Pimm said my mother was beautiful, charming and oh, everything that's nice," said Charlotte proudly.

"I'm glad," said Luke. "Very glad for you, love."

"I suppose you'll say it's a long time since the Pimms last saw her and she may have changed. But I'm not scared of that, somehow."

"Always the little optimist!" said Luke.

Charlotte felt suddenly happy. He was teasing her in the old way. He seemed more himself tonight. Apparently he had found all well at the inn, and his mother far too busy to be too inquisitive. Nobody had bothered to ask where he had been—or why he had had to leave St. Nevell at a moment's notice.

It was a bit cool and stormy down there, he said, but glorious—a glorious sunset when he got back. The sea was so fresh and sparkling after the oily blue of the Mediterranean waters. She was missing something by not being with her family at 'Windhover'.

"Maybe I'll come down soon," she ventured. "I've found my mother so much more quickly than even Mr. Vince anticipated."

"Due to your dogged persistence, love!"

She was silent for a second. She felt suddenly shy, even embarrassed with Luke—something she had never felt before. He was being friendly . . . yet she felt that a barrier had gone up . . . invisible, but definitely there . . . as

though a thick veil had dropped between them, interwoven by the memory of a lover's embrace; a long, long kiss; an open declaration of love from *him*. And her own lips, curiously hungry for the sweets of a first passion, reaching up to his . . . then drawing back, troubled by the wild confusion in her mind and heart.

They said good-bye over the phone quite casually. But long after she replaced the receiver, Charlotte brooded over the thought of Luke. And she knew that something that had been serene and marvellous and completely secure between them was spoilt.

The conversation with her adoptive mother was slightly more tense although both of them chatted lightly as though no awkwardness of any kind existed.

"I'm glad you're back so soon, darling," Anthea said in her cool, well-bred voice. "And I'm sure Daddy will be. Was the journey worthwhile?"

"Yes, Mummy—in fact it was. I got the address I've been wanting."

"You mean—your mother's?"

Charlotte squirmed a little. There was a volume of feeling behind that simple question and she sensed it.

"Yes. The—the detective is going down to find out a few things for me—in Brighton actually—tomorrow morning. I shall wait and hear what he says."

"That doesn't sound like you. You're learning to be cautious."

"That's what . . ." Charlotte began then pulled herself up with a jerk. She had been going to say *"That's what Luke said"* but realised that Anthea knew nothing of the part Luke was playing in this quest. She really disliked being deceitful—and telling lies. But it had to be done. She could not involve Luke. She said:

"I'll let you know how I get on."

Silence. Charlotte guessed that Anthea Harvey was having a tussle with herself not to ask more questions but she was usually a very controlled person, and she did not deviate now from her original decision not to ask Charlotte for details. She so disliked the whole thing. It made Charlotte feel dreadful—much more tonight than when they had previously discussed her wish to find her own mother. Deep down within her, Charlotte was changing—and knew it. Changing in her attitude towards the facts of her birth. *And* towards her adoptive mother. It did not help—that feeling. It flung her further into confusion and indecision. But she was determined to forge ahead. She avoided any mention of Mr. Nagorski and the set-up in Le Trayas. She said no more about her mother. She asked after Daddy and Michael.

"Daddy's fine. Glad to be down here. Mike's a bit put out that you haven't come but I've fed him with that story we agreed on about you staying in town to help Veronica."

Lies again, Charlotte reflected wretchedly. All so disagreeable—so unlike the old days when love, trust and loyalty were current in the Harvey house. She was glad Anthea could not see her sudden tears.

Anthea was communicative and friendly in one way—but the wall of ice, of resentment remained and Charlotte knew it. She could not do a thing about it. If Anthea had begged her outright in this moment to forget what she had discovered and call off the search—she could not have complied. The compulsion to go on with it to the bitter end remained. The burning, insatiable curiosity to see *that other mother—her own.*

Mrs. Harvey now began to tell her about a young Cambridge student who was staying at the inn for a month with a friend. Both of them were reading law.

They had chosen St. Nevell because they were mad about fishing for bass.

The elder boy, Christopher Rawson, was six foot three, very good looking and absolutely charming, Anthea said with enthusiasm. She'd had the two of them up to the house for drinks and they were looking forward to meeting Charlotte. Christopher's mother was dead. His father was a diplomat—at present out in Aden. Chris was just the nicest young man she had met for a long time. She was sure Charlotte would fall for him. (And so on, as though nothing untoward had ever happened.) Charlotte listened, her spirits low, her interest in the handsome six foot-three law-student practically nil. But she murmured something to the effect that she'd adore to meet him and would be down to Cornwall to join them all soon. But long after she had gone to bed that night, she lay awake, remembering that light, rather meaningless conversation with Anthea . . . and thinking about Luke. Luke, the first man ever to kiss her with love.

She knew quite well that in the old days, Anthea would have wanted her to be interested in an attractive young man who was reading law at Cambridge University, and had such a good social background. Perhaps the Charlotte of those days also would have been intrigued by the idea. If Christopher Rawson was on a fishing holiday in St. Nevell she would be bound to see a lot of him. It could have been fun.

But that fleeting moment of revelation with Luke had altered things strangely. It was not the handsome boy but Luke—his straining arms, his hungry, passionate kiss—that she thought about until finally she fell into an uneasy sleep.

14

It seemed to Charlotte that she herself was fated to act the detective, having engaged Oliver Vincent to do the job. On the morning he was due to go down to Brighton, the secretary whom he had called 'a gum-chewing female', telephoned Charlotte.

"Mr. Vince is sorry but he woke up this morning with a sore throat and a temperature of a hundred and one degrees so he isn't coming in today and that means he won't be going down to Brighton."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" said Charlotte.

The laconic voice added:

"He gets these attacks—it's nothing new."

"Well, please tell him how sorry I am—if you're phoning him—and also say that I shall go down to Brighton, myself, now."

"Okay."

As Charlotte stepped into the little car which her adoptive mother had left behind, she felt almost relieved that Vince was laid up. She had dreaded a long wasted day waiting for his report.

She knew the road to Brighton. In the days when Fish was Nanny to the family, she had had her mother living there. The children used to go down to see the rather nice old lady.

The London to Brighton road was congested with traffic. It was a fine day and everybody seemed to be heading for the coast.

This, Charlotte thought, was a much much more important event in her life than all the other visits had been. This route was leading direct to her mother. She tried to be sensible—as cautious as everybody wanted—but once again she felt a rising excitement which quickened her breathing and made her feel almost light-headed. She was a careful driver, however, and moved carefully along that wide, crowded road through Reigate and Crawley. It was only when she actually turned on to the front and saw the familiar promenade, the gay holiday decorations, and an unusually blue sea under a sunlit sky, that she speeded up. Every traffic light that halted her seemed to last too long.

She was going to see her mother. How madly, wildly exciting! No matter what her grandmother was like; no matter what *Luke* thought; no matter what the family down in Cornwall thought . . . this was the big day of her life. She could only beg the Fates to be kind (or pray to God, if that were the better thing) that she would find the sort of mother she hoped for and that this woman would accept her . . . *like her* . . . make all the misery worthwhile. The misery which Charlotte seemed to be causing her adoptive parents.

She passed the Royal Albion Hotel and slowed down again along the Kings Road. When finally she found the *boutique* with the name SOPHIE RICHARDS above it, her heart seemed to turn over. Her cheeks grew quite pale with emotion.

I was once called Sophie. And this is Sophie my mother.

She found a space, just vacated, in the long line of cars parked beside the promenade. She stepped out and crossed the road. She stood for a moment, staring into Sophie Richards's shop without seeing one of the dresses displayed. Her feelings were completely chaotic. The only

thing that brought a wry smile to her lips was a sudden glimpse she caught of herself in a long mirror. She realised that she had dressed as carefully this morning for this visit as though she were going to meet a favoured boy-friend. She so badly wanted her mother to think well of her.

She had put on her favourite pale-blue linen suit. Her short gloves were crisp and white. She carried the patent-leather bag she had taken to France. The long silky auburn hair hung down across her flushed cheeks. She did look glamorous. *She did*. If her mother ran a dress-shop she was sure to be critical. She would recognise 'chic' when she saw it.

For an instant Charlotte shut her eyes, prayed for luck, then walked into the *boutique*.

A young girl, in a brief cotton frock above her knees and with long fair hair tied back in a pony-tail, moved forward.

"Yes, madam?"

"I–I'd like to see M–Mrs. R–Richards," stammered Charlotte.

"Sorry. Madam is not in at the moment."

The usual, thought Charlotte. *The usual pricking of the balloon followed by that deflated feeling.*

"When will she be back?"

"Maybe this evening but not in time to see a client."

Charlotte cleared her throat, and tried to calm down.

"Have you any idea at all how late?"

The *vendeuse* looked at Charlotte with a vestige of surprise as though she wondered what this was all about. She did not think that the tall, auburn-haired girl was one of Madam's own clients. She said:

"I don't think Madam should be too late because Mr. Richards has been away for a couple of days and is

coming back himself this evening. Madam is in London on business. She told me to shut the shop at five and that she might be back at the flat after that."

Charlotte thought this over. *Five*. A long wait. It was only half-past eleven now. Six whole hours to fill in. She could, of course, buy sandwiches, drive herself up on the Devil's Dyke and sit there in the beautiful fresh air and sunshine and eat a solitary picnic. Afterwards she might even park the car and slip into a cinema. Anything—anything in order to pass the time.

She thought suddenly about Luke. She wished that he were here with her. Luke, her friend and most charming of companions. *Luke who had told her he loved her.*

It was astonishing and disturbing how the memory of that moment of passion kept returning to her memory. The young *vendeuse* was staring at her. Charlotte quickly said:

"I'll come back . . . I'll call at the flat when Mrs. Richards is home."

"If she telephones me during the day shall I tell her —" began the girl.

"No, no," broke in Charlotte, her cheeks rather red. "It isn't necessary. Don't bother, please."

She wanted to get out of the shop, yet somehow it fascinated her to stay and look around in that rather analytical way she had, dissecting everything she saw. It might be stupid, but she felt that she would even get to know her mother better through examining her décor here in her shop. And she was rather pleased with what she found. The elephant-grey carpet and taffeta-frilled curtains were in good taste and made an excellent background for the multi-coloured clothes. There were little gilt chairs, one big white vase full of flowers on a tall stand, and many gilt-framed mirrors. A typical smart *haute couture* salon.

Suddenly Charlotte let discretion go to the winds. She was in an expansive mood and dying of curiosity. She would not bear to rush out of her mother's little shop knowing absolutely nothing more than she had known when she came down to Brighton.

On one of her wild impulses, she began to question the *vendeuse.*

"I . . . actually I'm distantly r-related to M-Mrs. Richards," she stammered. "I haven't even seen her but I want to surprise her."

"Oh, I see," said the young girl and became less cautious, herself. "Won't you sit down, and I'll make you a cup of coffee? We aren't very busy. It's too fine—everyone's on the front, or in the sea. Funnily enough it's on the grey days the clients seem to go shopping and come in here."

Eagerly Charlotte accepted the invitation to coffee. The young girl, who introduced herself as Diane Morton, seemed pleased to talk to Madam's good-looking relative. They settled down to Nescafé, cigarettes and a chat. Once she started Diane proved to be the gossiping type and not very discreet. It wasn't long before Charlotte heard a great deal more about her mother—and very interesting it proved.

Diane adored Mrs. Richards, except when she was in a flap, and then she showed her foreign blood, Diane said with a giggle. She had the hell of a temper actually, but she could be *sweet*, and she was fabulous with her slanting eyes and gorgeous figure.

Avidly, Charlotte listened. She gradually formed the impression that her mother was by no means an easy woman to tackle, and was, in fact, quite like the difficult Sophie described by the horrid Marcelle.

Difficult, but charming.

"If you've never met her you'll be fascinated," said Diane.

If she only knew *how* fascinated I am now, Charlotte thought and said aloud:

"How long have you been with her, Diane?"

"Two years. Quite a time. I'm just twenty. I came here as a junior when I was eighteen. She used to have a bigger business, and a couple of us girls, but now she's cutting down. All the credit squeezes and political troubles and so on—women don't seem to be spending that amount of money on model frocks, do they?"

"Is business bad then?"

"Oh, a bit. Don't say I said so but I think Madam finds it slow sometimes, and all the bills coming in, too, and a lot of clients who don't pay cash and some who never pay at all!"

"What a shame."

Diane sipped her coffee and flickered her mascaraed lashes.

"Mr. Richards was saying the other day that it isn't much good having a small business these days unless you've a lot of capital behind you."

"And Mrs. Richards hasn't?"

"Well I can't really *say*. I mean, I'm not in her confidence about money, exactly, but Tony—Mr. Richards—he lets things out. I heard him saying they'd be going into liquidation unless the business hotted up."

Charlotte bit her lip. Her thoughts turned absurdly to Lady Craven's legacy. She could help her mother. Yes, and she would, if necessary.

Then Diane, growing more confidential every moment, gave her opinion of Sophie's second husband.

"He's a one. I expect you know Madam lost her first husband. She often says *he* was a nice fellow but Tony—

that's Mr. Richards—he isn't at all easy. Ever so good-looking, mind you, and she's mad about him. But there's about ten years between them. He's only twenty-seven. She's well over that—in her late thirties I reckon, although she doesn't admit it. She's got a young figure, she could be taken for his age."

Charlotte's heart began to knock a little. She didn't really want to hear *this*. How welcome would she—a large daughter of twenty—be to a young woman who was married to a man as young as twenty-seven?

Diane continued:

"Wait till you meet Tony. Everyone calls him that, you know. Mr. Richards is too formal for *him*. He's ever so friendly. All over the girls . . ." she giggled. "He can be *ever* so attractive. He's got Irish blood in him, they say, and blue eyes with lashes I'd give my soul for. I wouldn't need mascara . . ." She giggled again.

A sudden wave of depression swept over Charlotte. None of this sounded either pleasant or promising. Her poor mother! What sort of life must she be having with a handsome Irish type who was 'all over the girls'? Before Charlotte could mentally sum up Diane's gossip, Diane added:

"I know I oughtn't to say this and please don't give me away, will you, but I think most of the trouble in the flat upstairs," Diane cast her eyes to the ceiling, "is through Madam's jealousy. They have awful rows. I hear them . . ."

Charlotte stood up and Diane stopped abruptly.

"Are you off?"

"Yes," said Charlotte, her lips dry, "I'm off. Please don't say anything about me to Mrs. Richards if she rings. I'll come back later."

Diane, quite unaware that she had caused any distress,

smilingly opened the door for the beautifully dressed girl with the auburn hair, and then returned to her seat at Madam's desk to read her fashion magazine and smoke another of Madam's cigarettes.

Charlotte bought some sandwiches. She took them up on to the Dyke. She enjoyed the fresh, sweet air and the sunlight as she had expected. But she ate practically nothing and continued to feel depressed and worried for the rest of the afternoon. She could feel in her bones that this was not going to prove an easy or simple situation. In fact it was all very complicated. She began to feel so disturbed in her mind about this young attractive jealous mother with the young husband, that she almost panicked and decided to call the whole thing off. Perhaps everybody had been right and she had been wrong to pursue her own mother.

Yet the more she thought about it, the more reluctant Charlotte became to leave Brighton without introducing herself to Sophie. If she wasn't wanted, then she could soon clear out. Surely it could do no harm to give her mother the chance to accept her—or not—as the case might be.

Those six hours after she left the shop were the longest Charlotte had ever spent. She was racked with nervousness and all the old miserable indecision, by the time five o'clock came.

She knew full well that she was behaving like an idiot, but that longing for her mother, which had been so compulsive all the way along, led her finally to ring the bell at the side door by the shop—the door of the Richards' flat. She rang three times but there was no answer. She could, in fact, hear a telephone buzzing in the shop, but that, too, was locked up and shuttered.

She almost turned away, her throat hurting, then a car drove up and stopped outside the door. Two people got

out. The woman Charlotte recognised instantly from the description she had been given. Her breathing quickened. She almost choked with emotion.

This at last was her mother.

Sophie Richards was as slim as a girl, beautifully dressed in a tailored, off-white suit, with an emerald green pill-box hat on the back of her dark head. The slim, rather short young man with her, wearing blue and white drainpipe trousers and striped jacket—that must be Tony Richards. Almost as dark as his wife; hair rather too long but very handsome, yes. Film-star type. He looked cross and Sophie Richards even more so. Neither was smiling as they walked up to the door and stared curiously at Charlotte. Helplessly, speechless, she stared back.

Then the woman's face broke into an artificial smile.

"Were you wanting something? I'm Mrs. Richards, but the salon is closed," she began.

"Yes, I—I—I want to see you personally," said Charlotte, stumbling over her words. "If you could spare the—the time."

Sophie Richards went on looking at the lovely girl who was a head taller than herself. *Chic*—a good client perhaps, she thought.

"The salon is closed," she repeated; "but —"

"I—I won't keep you but it's terribly important," broke in Charlotte desperately.

The man gave her a sidelong glance, and she saw that look in the bold blue eyes which Diane had already warned her about.

"Perhaps this is a client. Oughtn't you to be a little more forthcoming, dear?" he said to his wife in an acid voice. Sophie Richards flushed.

"Oh, very well, you go on up, Tony. I'll see the young lady in the shop."

Thank goodness for that, thought Charlotte. But her heart went on fluttering madly and nervously as her mother unlocked the door of the shop and she followed her in.

Sophie did not bother to pull up the shutters but switched on the tubular lights which ran around the ceiling. She unpinned her pill-box hat and smoothed her hair, which was pulled straight back from her forehead with a knot at the back, and dressed with a small green bow. Eagerly watching, Charlotte thought how very beautiful she must have been as a girl. She was still *most* attractive with her pale camellia skin, regular features, and those tilted eyes. But she looked very tired and her lips were thin. Certainly she did not look good-tempered.

I'm not in the *least* like her, Charlotte thought, her heart sinking.

The woman turned with that bright smile which she seemed able to put on and turn off in the professional way.

"Did you, in fact, want to look at some clothes? I don't mind it being after hours, if you do."

"No, I don't want—clothes."

"May I ask why you have come, then? I don't think we know each other, do we?"

"No. My n-name is Charlotte H-Harvey . . ."

This had no effect whatever on Sophie Richards. She was busy pushing a few dresses along a bar in an open cupboard, muttering something about Diane being so untidy.

Charlotte summed up all her courage.

"I—I—oh, forgive me if I'm going to upset you but I've *got* to introduce myself. I—*I'm your daughter!*"

An electrified silence. Sophie swung round, as though she had heard a pistol shot. Mouth open, eyes wide, she

stared at the young girl with the auburn hair falling across her damp pink cheeks. Incredulously, she stared.

"Yes, I know it must be a shock," went on Charlotte, "but I—I've only just managed to trace you. I—I am Sophie. Sophie Nagorski. That was on my original birth certificate, I suppose. But I only knew about it all because I found the letters and documents that were sent to my adoptive parents by the Martlett Adoption Agency."

Again the silence, and Sophie still staring, her face chalk-white, her eyes big and startled. She looked unutterably shocked. Then she put a hand to her throat and began to laugh hysterically.

"What are you talking about? Sophie Nagorski was my name—my maiden name."

"It was mine too," said Charlotte quickly. "I was born in Barnet in 1946. I . . . I am just twenty. You . . . you had me adopted."

Charlotte blurted out the last words, realising with every passing second that she had done exactly what Vince had warned her against and rushed crazily into the 'china shop', smashing everything as she went.

"Oh, I've wanted to see you so much," she suddenly added in a pitiful voice. "Please, *please* say you're glad to see me. I've wanted my own mother so much."

"Good God!" exclaimed Sophie Richards and sat down and put a clenched fist against either cheek. She shook her head helplessly as she looked up at the tall girl.

"You do—remember?" Charlotte asked. "I mean . . . of *course* you must. Only you never expected to see me."

Sophie Richards drew breath. Her hands fell to her lap. Her thin white fingers with their gleaming silver nails twined convulsively.

"You had no right to come," she said.

15

THOSE words were like a body-blow that almost knocked the breath out of Charlotte. She had been warned—but she had not listened, or even learned, from the bitter lesson in Le Trayas. This was more bitter. Not a welcoming word; not an outstretched hand; not the smallest sign that her mother was delighted to see her own child—her grown-up daughter—after twenty years.

Charlotte took a step backward. Her eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry—I—suppose I shouldn't have come. I—realise that now. But I was anxious to see you," she ended brokenly.

Sophie Richards woke up. For a few terrible moments she had found herself face to face with a past long since forgotten—or at least placed so far back in the recess of her mind that she rarely if ever remembered the child she had given birth to in that Barnet maternity home.

Twenty years can be a long time—almost a quarter of a century. The Sophie Nagorski who had fallen so madly in love with a red-haired, ruddy-cheeked, happy-go-lucky student on a farm, who had been tumbled by him in a field, after dark, in the gold, sweet-smelling hay, and in the darkness of a barn, full of the rustling of birds and mice—no longer existed.

She had conceived a child. She had been told that it was a girl. That was all. She had had nine long months of misery and shame, nagged at by parents who promised to

help her only on the condition that she agreed to let the baby be adopted from birth. Deserted by her boy-friend, she had said a long farewell to love—and the painful memory of it. After they took the infant from her, she had deliberately forgotten it. She was not a maternal type. She used to long for a good time; for sensual love and material things, rather than a sentimental marriage. And as she had not been offered marriage, she did not want the child. It had been a relief rather than anguish when her mother had told her that it was all over and that 'good people' had adopted the little girl. She never gave little Sophie another thought until her first husband suggested they might have a family. Then she had remembered . . . and told him she did not want children. His own wish for fatherhood was not intense enough to make him demand it. As for her present husband—Sophie went hot and cold at the idea of the handsome, unstable young man upstairs, who said he 'hated kids', finding out about this one. What in God's name would he say if he walked into the salon and learned that this tall beautiful girl was *her daughter*—her illegitimate daughter, aged twenty! That put years on Sophie. And besides, the old scandal had been hushed up and never revived. Nobody—*nobody* today, knew about it.

Suddenly she stopped thinking about herself and stared wildly at the tall girl with her tear-filled eyes and unhappy face. For the first time, a pang hit Sophie Richards, *née* Nagorski. The pang of a woman who was aware of the pain, the unhappiness of her own child—difficult though it still was for her to accept the fact. She said:

"Oh, poor darling, you're upset! So am I, my God! You shouldn't really have come. You've only made us both miserable."

Charlotte sat down and covered her face with her hands.

"Forgive me. I repeat . . . I just wanted to know you," she whispered.

"Why?"

"Isn't it natural?"

"I suppose so . . ." Sophie looked helpless and hopeless and began to pace up and down the salon with quick nervous steps. The sweat was pearling on her forehead. She felt feverish. She kept looking at Charlotte's bowed auburn head.

"Now I can see you're like your father," she muttered. "He had your colouring. He was a good looking chap with your colour of eyes—that reddish hair."

"I hate him. He had no right to walk out on you. You must have suffered terribly!" Charlotte broke out and looked up at her mother with luminous eyes full of pain.

Sophie laughed.

"You're an idealist—kind of romantic. Well, I'm afraid I must disillusion you, my dear, if you've got any ideas that I'm the same. I admit I suffered till my parents said, they'd stand by me and get my child adopted—then I got over it. I never wanted a baby. I'm sorry to disappoint you—but I just *didn't* want one, even when I got married later on."

Charlotte stared at her incredulously. This hard beautiful woman was very far removed from the sweet, motherly woman of her imagination. She felt bewildered.

"I suppose I ought to be glad you've traced me, but how can I be?" Sophie went on. "It was all so long ago—and I have my own life to lead, now I'm married again. You saw my young husband. He's everything to me. He may be a so-and-so, but I dote on him. I'd give him anything in the world. Can you imagine what he'd say if he knew about *you*?"

Charlotte maintained a miserable silence. Sophie began to question her again:

"Tell me a few things—naturally I'm curious. How did you find out about me? When? I thought these Adoption Homes were under oath never to give information to an adopted child about its real parents."

"They are. I'm afraid I . . . I cheated. I wanted to see you so much, I hired a detective to help me trace you."

Sophie stared.

"Good heavens! But who told you my former name, Sophie Nagorski?"

"*I* was registered as that, too."

"I suppose so," muttered her mother. "What is your name now?"

"Charlotte Harvey."

"Charlotte Harvey," repeated her mother. "Well, I *never*. It really is fantastic! Just imagine me having a daughter called Charlotte—as old as you."

The girl hung her head as though all of a sudden she felt her age to be a shameful factor.

"Who are the Harveys?" she heard her mother asking.

Charlotte told her, hesitantly, feeling suddenly how tremendously nice the Harveys were, and what a secure, happy, totally different world from this one she had been living in until she found out the truth about her origin. She even felt she ought not to be telling a stranger about John and Anthea Harvey. And when Sophie looked at her with her slanting, almond, Polish eyes, and asked her if she had been happy, and satisfied with her adoptive parents, she was tongue-tied—even ashamed. All the grievances she had nourished against Anthea Harvey for not understanding her—not being in sympathy with her—seemed so petty in this hour.

A most upsetting, unaccountable loyalty to the two who

had brought her up as their daughter was fast creeping into Charlotte's consciousness. She felt none of the rapturous elation she had anticipated, now that she actually was with her own mother. She felt, indeed, so far removed from this woman, Sophie Richards, that she might have been a total stranger.

Sophie went on probing—out of curiosity more than affection. That was obvious to Charlotte.

"What made you *want* to find me so much?"

Charlotte, crimson, confused, stuttered:

"I . . . just did. I . . . thought we'd have a lot in common and that you'd want to see *me*, and that it would fulfil something in both of us—something we'd never known. In other words that our reunion would bring us tremendous joy."

"Oh, God!" said Sophie Richards and sat down suddenly, and closed her beautiful, tormented eyes. Then she opened them and looked up at the ceiling as though she could actually see the young man in the room above.

Acutely sensitive, Charlotte broke out:

"I think I understand now. I've been mistaken . . . it was wrong of me. They said it was . . . they said I shouldn't try to find you."

"They were right," said the older woman brutally. Not that she really meant to be brutal. She just could not gauge the depths of the disappointment she caused this young girl; or understand the deep, natural urge that had brought her here. Sophie was first and foremost an egotist, obsessed with her own life, her own fortunes and misfortunes; with her marriage and with that young, equally egotistical, lazy young man she had married. He was an obsession.

Yet somewhere within her there stirred a faint desire to be gentle with the child she had conceived in such hot

passion during that wild intemperate summer of twenty-one years ago.

She had been so young; so had *he*; and so crazy. And he had looked like this girl, she could remember him quite clearly now. Auburn-haired, fair-skinned, tall.

Sophie was appalled to find that the past could rise and return like this, weaving its threads into the fabric of the present. Threatening her future, too. That last fear banished any desire Sophie might otherwise have felt to further a sentimental acquaintanceship with her daughter.

"Neither my husband, Tony, nor anyone else must know about you," she said, in a panic-stricken voice.

"They never will," said Charlotte in a low voice.

Sophie looked relieved. She got up, went behind the curtain, found two glasses and a bottle of sherry.

"You'd better have a drink with me," she said with a shaky laugh. "I keep this for my special clients."

"Not for me, thank you —"

Charlotte had been about to add the word *Mother* but could not bring herself to do so. She stood silent watching Sophie toss down her drink and dab her lips with a small handkerchief. How sad this was, Charlotte thought. How tragic to be a mother and yet not in the least interested in her own child.

"Tell me about my father," said Sophie suddenly. "You got my address in London when I was still Bill's wife, from him, didn't you?"

Charlotte gave her a brief résumé of that not very happy meeting with Stanislaw Nagorski in the Villa Helois. Sophie narrowed her gaze and lit a cigarette which she pulled out of her bag.

"It sounds as though poor Dad has deteriorated. He was always a bit difficult but I could have stuck to him. But not after my mother died—Marcelle is a —"

She broke off significantly. Charlotte nodded.

"She wasn't very nice."

"I'm surprised she obliged with my old Putney address," began Sophie, then added: "No—I expect she did it to embarrass me—she *would*."

Charlotte crimsoned. So that's what she was, an embarrassment. Oh God! how right everybody had been!

"I wish you hadn't told Marcelle who you were," said Sophie, pettishly, "but perhaps it doesn't matter. They live so far away. Marcelle doesn't know my new name and address, anyhow."

"No—I didn't know either, *then*. Now perhaps I'd better go—" said Charlotte miserably, and moved towards the door.

But suddenly Sophie Richards broke out of the armour in which she had encased herself for so many years. She seemed all of a sudden to realise to the full that this was her child—her *daughter*. It struck a chord. She ran after Charlotte and pulled her into her arms.

"Oh, my dear!" she said in a stifled voice.

At once Charlotte melted. In turn she embraced the slim, graceful figure.

"*Mother*—" she murmured the name involuntarily.

"Oh, for God's sake, *don't*," Sophie broke the tension by laughing wildly. "It doesn't suit me. I honestly don't *look* like your mother, do I?"

Charlotte froze again. She disengaged herself from Sophie's embrace.

"No, you don't—you might be my sister."

Sophie reached up and kissed the soft pink cheeks.

"Thanks, darling. And forgive me if I've been a terrible disappointment to you but I—well it's all too late, isn't it? I've got my life and you've got yours. We can't

get together now—not as things are. It really is too late. It might have been different if you'd turned up just after my first husband died. I was pretty lonely then but I met Tony soon afterwards. Tony would never accept a step-daughter only seven years younger than himself. And besides, whether you think me awful or not—I *have* lied to him over my age and it would be ghastly if he found out."

Charlotte nodded. Sophie went on:

"I couldn't tell him that you were my daughter without making him feel that he's married to a sort of elderly woman . . ." She gave a brief unhappy laugh and avoided Charlotte's eye. "I could of course say you were a niece or something so that we could go on seeing each other, but, to be blunt, darling, you're too attractive. It would be dangerous."

Charlotte, remembering all that Diane had said about Madam's jealousy, understood only too well. She was full of sympathy for her mother and yet felt something near a longing to get away as quickly as she could. Somehow she had never imagined herself turning out to be a girl that Sophie could be *jealous* of. It destroyed all her warm impulsive need for her own mother; but when she spoke it was with a genuine concern.

"Poor you—I'm sorry I ever came and worried you. I never guessed . . ." She broke off and turned away.

But Sophie had pulled herself together. She looked at the tall, auburn-haired girl quite gaily now.

"Never mind, darling—it's been rather a wonderful surprise meeting you, you're a real ghost from the past."

Charlotte gave a weak smile.

"Rather a substantial ghost, I'm afraid."

"You're very pretty, darling, and dress beautifully. Quite a chip off the old block, if it comes to that," said

Sophie in the same gay voice. "I shall remember you with quite a lot of pride."

"Then you don't—want to see me again?"

Sophie frowned, hunched her shoulders and once more looked up at the ceiling.

"You know why—it would cause trouble upstairs. But I shall think about you quite often."

Charlotte felt as though a lump were sticking in her throat, choking anything she, herself, might have said in return. This whole meeting had been such a ghastly anti-climax. She felt so dreadful that she scarcely knew how she could go back and tell everybody how miserably she had failed in her great enterprise. Her mother's reception of her had stunned her. She could see, of course, that she had built up far too sentimental and hopeful a picture of the meeting—despite all the warnings from her adoptive parents, from Luke, from the detective, and even from Old Fish. They were all older and wiser than she was. *She* had had to learn the hard way.

"Tell me more about yourself—your—people—the Harveys," said Sophie with genuine interest. "You've given me a shock, you know, but I'm not inhuman. I do want to know more about you. Tell me this . . . and this . . . and this . . ."

She asked a dozen more questions. Charlotte answered them all frankly—willingly. But the thrill had gone out of this meeting. It was flat; bitter medicine instead of the sparkling champagne she had hoped for. Time went by and still mother and daughter talked. Then suddenly the old determined Charlotte not yet wholly defeated, revived. She remembered something that Diane had hinted—something important about money.

She looked at her mother, hope in her eyes again.

"Could I be of any help to you?"

"You're a darling—but how?" Sophie asked, feeling much happier now she knew her daughter meant to go away quietly without wrecking her life.

"I mean—I've come into money from my grandmother; that is, Mrs. Harvey's mother, and I—" She broke off, hot with embarrassment.

Sophie sighed.

"The family that adopted you seem to be very well off!"

"Yes, they are."

"Then you've something to thank me for, really. If I'd kept you, you'd have had a very different sort of life—a struggle like I've had all these years. I've slaved away most of my life. And I was doing quite nicely down here until the present damned political situation blew up. I can still sell clothes and make a bit of money in my shop but the expensive models are out of it. It's all cheap stuff and the business is not big enough to make real money. Tony is always saying so."

"Then I might help you —" Charlotte began again, pathetically eager to form some kind of permanent contact with her mother. Despite everything that Sophie Richards had said to disappoint or disillusion her, she was still painfully conscious of the blood-tie between them; just that *something* that made Sophie more important to her than Anthea Harvey who was obviously a far finer, better person in every way. Sophie had a charm for her daughter that could not be denied. She repeated the significant question:

"Can I help?"

Sophie Richards, more moved than she had ever been in her selfish life, walked towards the girl and kissed her.

"You're a darling," she said. "You really are, but I wouldn't *dream* of taking a penny from you. I owe *you*

something after the way I ditched you, so to speak, at your birth. No, maybe I did you a good turn—handing you over to such nice people."

A very guilty Charlotte hung her head.

"They are—terribly nice and they've been terribly good to me."

"They obviously gave you an education and background I could never have afforded."

"That's true."

"Well, they've made a very nice girl of you. Oh, it's extraordinary—looking at you and realising I gave birth to you!" said Sophie, shaking her head. "You just don't seem my child at all. But as I said—it's your father you favour physically. I don't know what your temperament is like."

"Maybe a bit like yours," said Charlotte with a sudden warm friendly smile. "They say I'm terribly impulsive and headstrong and when I learned about being half Polish, I put all those traits in my character down to my foreign blood."

Suddenly the two of them laughed together, touched hands, kissed again, and this time there were tears in Sophie Richards's eyes. She whispered:

"God bless you, my dear. I'll never never forget you but I do think it best if we don't meet again."

In sudden anguish Charlotte cried:

"Oh, *please!*"

At that moment the door of the salon opened. Sophie's husband walked in. He grinned at them.

"You two seem to have had long enough to buy or sell the shop three times over. Hope it's meant good business."

Charlotte caught her mother's gaze. She read the frenzied appeal in those eyes and answered it. She said:

"Thank you so much for giving me so much time and showing me all your models, Mrs. Richards. I can see why my friend recommended you. Your things are lovely. So sorry there was nothing I really wanted. Good-bye."

"Good-bye and thank you for coming," said Sophie in a high, artificial voice.

Charlotte gave a last look at her mother, turned and walked out of the salon without even a glance at Tony Richards.

As the door shut Tony said:

"What a fabulous-looking girl! What a figure! Couldn't you sell her one of your models, Soph? She looked good for a pound or two. Who was she?"

Sophie answered the last question. Her eyes were smarting. She had to blink the tears fiercely back. She spoke in a casual voice.

"I haven't the least idea. Just a girl who came to look at my collection."

16

ST. NEVELL is one of the few Cornish villages along that wild and beautiful coast that has not yet been invaded by campers, caravans, or crowds. The reason perhaps is because the approach is impossible for coaches. The village itself lies at the foot of a hill then the cliff rises steeply, with two or three nasty hairpin bends in the road on the way up. Only small cars dare to make the descent. The surface of the road is rough. One comes suddenly upon the straggling cottages, the tiny post office which is also a general store. At the bottom is a stone-built house which looks as if it has been hewn like a small fortress out of the rocks. Over the front door there swings the painting of a seagull in a wrought-iron frame. This is Gull Rock Inn. The proprietor, Mr. Luke Martin.

Gull Rock Inn was probably built two hundred years ago. It was said that it had once been a smugglers' retreat. The wide terrace was added by the last owner, before Luke took over the place. Baskets of creeper and trailing flowers brought some colour and design but during the winter nothing much survived. The storms were fearful and the sea rolled up the narrow road and dashed over the terrace, soaking it—often damaging it. No hope of trees growing there, only one or two solitary bushes, and masses of the small blue hydrangeas which grow so plentifully in that area.

The golden sands are encircled by two promontories as though by green, loving arms. The smooth sands glisten

with tiny delicate shells and little violet-hued pebbles. Under the long stone wall that runs the length of the beach, one or two fishermen's boats are usually moored. Amongst them is a new-looking, attractive boat, white and blue, with an outboard motor, which belongs to the Harveys.

The Harveys' big modern bungalow—'Windhover'—is three minutes' walk up the hill away from the inn. It has a magnificent view of the coast. It is more protected than the inn, but even in that small garden nothing much grows save tamarisk bushes, pampas-grass, and a riot of nasturtiums.

On this particular morning in the first week in August, Luke Martin, having finished clearing up in the bar, came out of the inn and strolled on to the terrace. He narrowed his eyes in the sudden dazzle of sunshine and drew a long breath of the invigorating air.

His mother followed him out.

"I'm just going to take the car into Redruth, Luke dear," she announced.

He turned and smiled at her. There was never much sentimental display of feeling between them but he adored this woman and he knew that to her he was the beginning and end of life. He could never be sufficiently grateful to her for all she had done for him. And when he thought of what she used to be—what she used to have—and all that she had given up for his sake, his admiration, like his gratitude, was unbounded.

He remembered only too well the beautiful home they used to live in, in Worcestershire. The halcyon days when his father had been alive and he, Luke, was still at school. The Martins had always liked the country but the Ann Martin of those days had done no domestic work. She had had a big staff, a lazy life compared with the one she

was leading now when she was nearing her sixties. They used to hold big parties in the old home and Mum had been sociable and a good hostess *and* one of the best-dressed women of her circle.

He looked at her as she was today. Small, thin—sometimes he thought she was too thin. The skin that she used to take such care of, was dry, brown and lined. The grey hair short-cut and brushed back like a boy's. The once beautiful eyes, as blue as his own, hidden behind dark, horn-rimmed spectacles. She wore coarse linen slacks and a dark-blue sleeveless jersey, and—incongruously—real pearls in the pierced lobes of her ears. The valuable earrings his father had given her when he, Luke, was born.

She worked like a slave in the inn. It was difficult to get help in St. Nevell although they had the faithful old Jim who had worked at the Gull Rock for most of his life and been in turn 'boy', bar-tender, waiter, and, at times, driver. Old Jim could do anything. Then there was Lily—one of the Tregunter family which had lived in the village, so it was said, since the days of Queen Anne. Lily helped with the housework. Mrs. Martin shared the cooking with old Mrs. Pegg who cooked well when she hadn't had too much rum the night before.

But they were a happy lot. Ann Martin knew how to manage people and when she smiled as she did now at her son, her small, withering face was as pretty and beguiling as a girl's.

"Want anything in Redruth?"

"You might tell them to hurry up with those cigarettes. We're rather low in the filter-tips."

"Okay, darling."

Luke took a pipe from his pocket and stuck it between his teeth. Shading his eyes with his hand he looked out at the sea. That glorious blue-green sea that never failed to

impress him with its power, its changing beauty, its magnificence.

"Going to be a warm day, I reckon," he said.

"Yes. By the way, Mrs. Harvey has just phoned and asked me to remind Crawfords' to send all the stuff for their party in good time tomorrow. Mrs. H. said it was a belated birthday party for Charlotte as she didn't have one in Town. Of course you know—Charlotte's coming down tonight."

Luke did not turn to his mother but continued to stare out at sea.

"H'm," he said indifferently.

Ann Martin looked a trifle anxiously at the tall figure in the denims and check shirt that Luke usually wore when he was cleaning up. There was something significantly rigid about that back—in the set of those shoulders. Her heart sank. She stood there, silent, reflective, and her thoughts held a touch of resentment when they circled around Charlotte Harvey.

She was much too shrewd not to realise that Luke knew perfectly well that Charlotte was coming down to St. Nevell tonight; that he hadn't for a moment forgotten it. Unfortunately she also knew that he was in love with the girl. Not one word had he ever said. But the mother knew it. And she felt desperately sad and afraid for her son. He had suffered so much, what with the tragedy of his first marriage and the rheumatic fever that had ended his career. He was a brave fine young man, her Luke. He deserved something better from life than this. But he had been happy enough until that wretched Charlotte began to grow up and take up so much of his time and thoughts.

Mrs. Martin had seen it coming for a long time. She still did not know where Luke had gone that night that he had dashed so suddenly up to London—or what he had

been doing before he had returned home twenty-four hours later. But somehow she had guessed it was something to do with Charlotte.

I shall feel like committing murder if she makes him miserable, Ann thought, and set her teeth as she got into her car and drove off.

She had nothing really against Charlotte. She actually liked and admired her. There was something rather gallant and fearless about the girl and of course she was often strikingly beautiful to look at. Ann Martin generously acknowledged that fact. But she had sometimes thought that Charlotte, particularly as a child, was a bit too self-centred. She over-dramatised things and, in the holidays, spent far too much time down here, confiding in Luke. Mrs. Martin used to feel that it was Charlotte's mother whom the girl should really have made her confidante. But on the one occasion when she had mentioned this to her son, Luke had laughed:

"Dear Mama—don't you remember your own adolescence? One never confided in one's parents—always in somebody else's."

So Ann had laughed that off. And sometimes she had been quite sorry for the young girl who used to come into the inn with red-rimmed eyes, looking dejected and obviously having had a misunderstanding with her mother.

Sometimes Ann wondered if Mrs. Harvey was very tactful with her. She thought Anthea a nice woman—but a little too social and conventional for Ann, who had grown out of that way of life. She could see that Mrs. Harvey clung rather desperately to the shibboleths and the gracious living that were rapidly becoming just a pleasant page in past history. She was too well-dressed; too perfect; never a hair out of place; very different really

from young Charlotte with her long wind-swept hair, her sun-browned limbs displayed without a trace of self-consciousness, in the manner of all young people today.

The adolescent girl had grown up. Ann could see the change in Charlotte, every summer she came back to Cornwall. She had also noted the change in Luke's attitude. That was what really worried her.

"Chris Rawson was saying, just before he went fishing, that he and Adam have been asked to go up and meet the famous Charlotte after supper tonight," said Mrs. Martin.

"Oh, really," was Luke's reply. And even his mother did not know what unspoken feeling lay behind that indifferent comment.

After she had gone Luke thought about Charlotte. And thought about Christopher Rawson, too. The tall handsome young man from University, going up to 'Windhover' to meet 'the famous Charlotte' tonight.

It was quite obvious to Luke that everybody meant to try and push Charlotte and Chris Rawson together. Even John Harvey, himself, had mentioned the two of them in the same breath when he was drinking in the bar last night.

"Nice fellow, that young Rawson. Hope Charlotte will like him. She needs some young company of that kind."

Luke had agreed. But he had felt then as he felt this morning, unutterably depressed.

Dear God! Why did he have to fall so much in love with that gorgeous, wayward, *idiotic* girl who had chased all over the place, searching for her mother? Why had he ever let go of himself and taken her in his arms, and tasted the wild honey of her lips, that day in Le Trayas? Why didn't he take the blinkers off and look fairly and squarely at the situation and realise that nothing could

ever come of this love that had sprung, unasked, unwanted, into his heart?

So many whys and no answers. But he loved her deeply—far too deeply—and it was not to be denied. He thought of nobody else.

It seemed a good deal more than a week ago since they had been in Le Trayas together. A long week of happy and very unhappy remembering . . .

The last time he had spoken to her was on the telephone a few nights ago.

It had always made his heart feel as though it was twisted when that telephone rang just after closing time, for that was when Charlotte generally made those special, confidential calls to the Gull Rock Inn.

She certainly had news for him. She had found her mother at last.

Engaging that detective, Vince, had scarcely been worthwhile. She seemed to have done most of the essential work herself—and at last succeeded, although, of course, Vince's professional help had been useful.

She had found her mother; but it hadn't been a success.

When she first told him everything he felt the utmost pity for her. It never entered his head to say *'I told you so'*. He loved her far too dearly. He had understood the urgency of her desire to trace her real mother. Poor little Charlotte! What a rotten end to her hopes and dreams. She hadn't said much but Luke had put two and two together. He had gathered that although she had been pleased to find such an attractive and quite well-educated woman, she had not been what Charlotte had hoped for. It must have been a bitter blow—and so humiliating. Luke heard the story of the smart, twice-married woman running her dress shop in Brighton, married to this young man of whom she was so jealous.

"Obviously it would be too frightfully awkward for my mother if I had presented myself as her daughter when *he* thinks her still in her late twenties! And here am I—twenty-one next birthday," Charlotte had said with a hollow laugh.

"I'm terribly sorry, love," was Luke's answer. But he felt helpless to comfort her.

"I'm not going to see her again," added Charlotte glumly.

"Is that your wish?"

"No, hers."

"It's for the best. You know that, love."

"Oh, yes, you've all been so right," she broke out with a bitterness he did not deserve, and she realised it, for quickly she went on:

"I don't blame anybody but myself and you've been marvellous to me, Luke, all the way along. I'll never forget it."

"I expect you will," had been his dry remark.

"Well, I'm not coming straight down to St. Nevell."

"You should, you know—the family will be anxious about you."

"I've rung them and explained that I want to stay and see my friend Emma. She's flying over from Rome unexpectedly and will be in Town tomorrow."

"Ah, yes, your girl-friend, Emma. Does she *know*?"

"No, and I promised Mummy I wouldn't tell her but it's going to be frightfully difficult not to. However, Emma has had a bit of trouble with her Italian and she is anxious to ask my advice."

"*Your* advice?" repeated Luke on a questioning note.

"Don't be horrid."

"Sorry, love," he laughed. "It was beastly of me."

"You're right, of course," Charlotte admitted. "I'm

hardly fit to give anyone advice over a love affair. Look at the mess I've made of my own life."

"Charlotte, darling, don't start being too dramatic," he warned her. "No harm has been done. It might have been a mess if you'd taken a great fancy to your mother and walked out on your family. But you haven't, so no need to fuss. Emma's troubles will be all sex, anyhow, plus her Italian painter. *You're* not having any trouble with your sex life, I hope."

He spoke deliberately with a flippancy that he was far from feeling. It cut like a knife when she giggled and exclaimed:

"None at all, I *assure* you."

Then, masochistically, he had said:

"Ah, well, the handsome Christopher Rawson awaits you down here with breathless wonder."

"He can wait." She had laughed again, and Luke had been a little comforted when she went on to tell him that she most of all looked forward to seeing *him*, her friend, Luke.

Her friend, he had thought, as he put down the receiver; teeth and hands clenched. He took refuge in a strong whisky which he rarely drank. It was not his habit to take anything but an occasional glass of beer with a friend in the bar.

He was unutterably thankful that Charlotte was over this hurdle—this mother-urge. It had been such a dangerous quest for something she had thought she needed but which now, when she had found it, she did not want at all. What a mix-up for her emotions—his poor Charlotte! As far as his personal feelings were concerned, Luke was thoroughly disturbed and conscious for the first time since he had known Charlotte that he did not particularly want her to come down to St. Nevell this time.

17

"Hi, Lottie, how's yourself?"

It was Michael Harvey's old brotherly greeting that welcomed Charlotte when she first walked into 'Windhover' that summer evening.

If she had felt at all worried or awkward about meeting the family again, she realised that there was no need for such feelings from the moment she was home again. It was amazing how easily things seemed to fall into their rightful place. Of course, Michael knew nothing. He was delighted to see her and ready with his teasing:

"Got a boy-friend for you—a smasher —" he began.

Anthea Harvey playfully smacked the peeling, sunburned face of her son.

"You *are* a pest, Mike. Leave Charlotte alone, and let her decide for herself whether she thinks Chris is a smasher, or not."

"Hum, yes, Christopher Rawson," said Charlotte and laughed. "The six foot three wonder boy everybody's lining up for me."

"He's coming up to meet you tonight," said Michael with a wicked grin. "Hope you've brought some smashing clothes?"

Here, John Harvey, who was unfolding an evening paper that he had bought at Helston, intervened:

"For goodness' sake, Mike, go and put the car away. It's raining."

"It can't do that!" yelled Michael. "I want my barbecue."

"Well, not tonight. Charlotte must be very tired. Let's have a civilised meal indoors," said his mother.

"Izzy, wuzzy tired, poor ickle Lottie —" began Michael, who was then positively pushed out of the room by his father, who returned and laughed at the two women.

"That's got rid of our juvenile delinquent."

"He'll never grow up," sighed Anthea.

"That's his charm," said Charlotte, and added on a more serious note, "He's lucky. Growing up can be a darned painful process. Don't I know!"

Mr. Harvey carried her suitcase along to her room at the end of the corridor. It was small but made up for its size by having a magnificent view of the coast and the splendid sea. Charlotte looked out of the window. All the way down from Paddington it had been fine but now the rain was coming down, veiling the landscape. The Atlantic flecked with 'white horses' looked grey and sad.

Charlotte turned away, shaking back her long untidy hair. She looked at her adoptive mother. Looked—and felt a terrific reversion of all her feelings. How wonderful Mummy seemed all of a sudden. Sophie Richards was pretty enough. Smart and youthful for her age. But Anthea Harvey was a poised, much more elegant woman, even in casual black slacks, and white jersey. Her silky auburn hair was smoothly brushed to one side. She looked at once older than Sophie, yet younger, and it almost gave Charlotte a pang to see the colour of her hair again. Such a short while ago she had resented it—thought of its significance as false and hypocritical . . . the auburn-haired woman adopting an auburn-haired baby and pretending it was hers. But this evening when Charlotte remembered her own mother, she seemed a stranger. It

was almost as though they had no tie—no association whatsoever. She did not resemble Sophie at all, in features or colouring, and as far as her unknown father was concerned, Charlotte couldn't care less.

But Mummy was *real*. It was Mummy who had fed her when she was an infant, bathed her, looked after her, with Old Fish, from the third week of her life. Had bought her clothes, seen to her teeth, her hair, her health in general; been interested in her education. It was to Anthea Charlotte had flown with her childish troubles. Only later, during the adolescent period, had she begun to feel they were out of tune. This evening Charlotte remembered something that Emma had said to her.

When the two friends met yesterday it had been by almost a superhuman effort that Charlotte refrained from telling Emma what she had found out about her birth. But she had kept her promise to the Harveys. Casually she had fabricated a little tale for Emma about 'a friend' who found she did not get on with her adoptive mother and wanted to find her own, and of course Emma hadn't for a moment imagined she was talking about herself. Why should she? Like everybody else, Emma fully believed that Charlotte was a Harvey.

But she had said:

"Oh, we're all the same in our teens, darling, surely. I never got on with my Mum, did I? You know that! It's a phase we go through. Then the time comes when we know how much we love and need them, and go running back to them."

And she had gone on to confess to Charlotte that her love-affair in Rome was not working out quite as gloriously as she had hoped. Angelo was still mad about her but frightfully selfish—obsessed with his art—she didn't have much life of her own any more. And even her

painting suffered. She rarely picked up a brush these days. Angelo was the great painter—the one who had to be waited on, spoiled and admired.

They had had rows lately. They hadn't actually broken up—Angelo had promised to come back to London this year. But Emma felt that the original spell was breaking. She had come over to London to see her father, Dr. Creighton. He was in Guy's Hospital having a small operation. Her mother needed her—had given her a terrific welcome. Emma began to realise that after all they had quite a lot in common.

Before Emma left, Charlotte herself could see more clearly how wrong she had been to suppose that it was only her adoptive mother who failed to understand. Most mothers and daughters failed at times to see eye to eye in all things. She had been even more mistaken in imagining that once she found her *own* mother, she would necessarily find complete compatibility and 'togetherness'.

Suddenly Anthea Harvey was enveloped in a pair of warm young arms. Her adopted daughter's grateful lips touched her cheek.

"Dear, darling Mum."

That was all Charlotte said, in a very low, muffled voice, but it spoke volumes, and it did more for Anthea Harvey than the bracing air of Cornwall or any tonic she could have been given. John had been saying last night that she ought to have a check-up because she slept so badly these days and had no appetite; but it had all been because she was so deeply concerned about Charlotte. *And so jealous.* Wild horses would not have dragged that admission from Anthea but she *had* been horribly jealous of this woman who had suddenly begun to mean *Mother* to Charlotte; for whom she had temporarily quite deserted her family, and her home.

Perhaps the biggest gesture Anthea ever made to tact was when she stood there returning Charlotte's kisses and affection, but asked not a single question.

It was Charlotte who dragged her down to the edge of the bed, sat beside her, and holding one of the slim cool hands in hers, offered the information that Anthea secretly coveted.

"*I saw her*, Mum. We had a long long talk. She—my mother, I mean."

Anthea with admirable control, said:

"Well?"

Charlotte described the meeting in the Brighton *boutique*. Having an excellent memory, she was able to repeat almost everything that had been said between Sophie Richards and herself. Anthea Harvey listened, unutterably relieved yet a little shocked. It really *was* shocking . . . a woman willing to deny her own flesh and blood rather than admit her age.

But Charlotte was tolerant and understanding all of a sudden. She said:

"I'm very sorry for her. After all, she had built up her life without me, all these years, and I suppose there was no real reason why she should push everything aside and pull me into the charmed circle. She's terribly attractive, Mummy, but obviously the sort that can't do without a man in her life. Tony Richards seemed a thoroughly spoiled self-centred type. Lazy, too. If he'd learned the truth, he'd probably have walked out on her, poor thing."

"I'm sorry for her," said Anthea, and drew away from Charlotte and lit a cigarette.

As she afterwards told her husband, she had never before felt such a heavy weight being removed from her back. She had been so scared about their girl . . . *their daughter* . . . (*to hell with Sophie Richards and the*

Nagorskis). It was all pitiable. And how dangerous! Supposing Charlotte had found exactly the right type in Sophie . . . the mother of her dreams? Supposing she had never come back into the Harvey fold?

Suddenly Anthea conceded an inch of pride. She appealed to Charlotte.

"You *are* our daughter again, aren't you, darling?"

"Yes. I am. Please both forgive me . . ." Charlotte's eyes filled with tears and she put Anthea's hand against her hot cheek. "I have a lot to be remorseful for. I was beastly."

"No—only natural. Daddy and I understand, but he will be terribly pleased," said Anthea—which remark might have been called a masterly understatement of fact.

Charlotte stood up. She drew a hand over her eyes and sniffed.

"I must have a bath—those trains are filthy, and it was so hot—"

"Yes, of course. I've laid on a cold lobster for supper. You love lobster, with my mayonnaise, don't you?"

"Adore it. You're a darling!"

Anthea looked up at the girl. She was beautiful and glowing, but under the glow there was a look of strain . . . as though the events of the past few weeks had sapped some of her strength—and even her extreme youth. She looked, somehow, much older.

"Charl," said Mrs. Harvey, "are you going to—see your—mother, any more?"

"No."

"Because *she* doesn't want it?"

Charlotte faced the moment of truth.

"No. I don't want it, either. I don't really think we had much to offer each other. We'll be better apart. I'm going to try and put the whole thing out of mind."

Anthea Harvey would have been a hypocrite if she hadn't confessed to herself that her heart leaped with joy.

"Well, you know that Daddy and I would never have stood between you if —" she began.

"I don't want to see her again," broke in Charlotte firmly.

Anthea drew a long breath of her cigarette.

"Oh well—I don't know about you but I'm hungry, darling. I'm going to ask Daddy to open a bottle of wine. We'll—celebrate your return."

Charlotte slipped out of her dress and into her bath robe.

"Thanks awfully, Mum, and I'm thrilled about the party you've laid on for me tomorrow. Who's coming?"

Anthea gaily gave her a list of the guests—mostly friends from the district. And of course the two boys who were staying at the Gull Rock Inn.

Charlotte smiled.

"Oh, yes—this spectacular young man who has been wished on me."

"I'm sure you'll fall for him, dear. We all have."

"It'll be lots of fun," Charlotte said lightly.

Then, as her mother started to walk towards the door, she went on:

"Have you asked the Martins?"

"Of course. They'll come up after closing-time. Incidentally, Luke's been a bit off colour. Daddy and I both think he's got a girl-friend tucked away somewhere. He goes mooching around in a sort of world of his own, and he suddenly dashed off to London the other day without any explanation; at least so his mother told me."

"Oh, really!" said Charlotte, and went bright scarlet.

When she was alone, she sat down and stared at her reflection in the mirror while her bath was running. She

felt guilty and very disturbed. Of course, Mummy knew nothing about that journey to Le Trayas with Luke. What a lot of lies had been told—and for nothing, she thought, sighing. And could it be possible that Luke really *was* in love with her? So much so that people were noticing a change in him?

She had felt happy and secure just now with her adoptive mother. So many dark clouds seemed to have rolled away—so many doubts had been allayed. The truth had been painful but in the end she knew she would gain rather than lose. She really felt that tonight she had come home—to her *real* home—her *real* people.

But there was still the problem of Luke . . . and the memory of those kisses in Le Trayas.

It was of Luke she thought, rather than Chris Rawson, while she lay in her bath. She made up her mind that before the evening ended, somehow she must slip down to the Gull Rock and see Luke alone.

Dinner was eaten by the Harveys in the big kitchen of 'Windhover', a long low room divided into two, half of which was used for meals. It looked like a ship's dining-saloon. Mr. Harvey had designed the round windows opening outwards like portholes; and with the concealed lights in the ceiling, polished wood-panelling, and a sensational view of sea and sky; it looked very nautical. Charlotte had always loved it.

There was no formality while they were at their Cornish holiday home. Even Anthea forgot to be conventional when she was down here and, like Charlotte, wore slacks and jerseys most of the time.

Old Mrs. Moffat, who they called 'Moff', came up from the village and did for them. She cooked the meals and left her tasty dishes on a long sideboard which divided the saloon from the kitchen. The family helped them-

selves. When it grew dark, instead of electric light they burned two old ships' oil lamps by the table.

In this dim, picturesque light, Charlotte sat tonight between her adoptive parents and felt a deep, underlying sense of relief that she was back in the fold. She felt that she had come through some kind of storm. It had uprooted her, torn her from her moorings and flung her into absolute chaos.

Now the storm had died down and she was in harbour again. She hardly gave a thought to Sophie Richards—the beautiful, sad, disturbed woman she had fought so tempestuously to find—and never once dared to speak to with intimacy and affection, as she had done tonight, to Mummy.

She looked at Anthea Harvey. She was sipping her coffee, laughing, chatting with Mike. Charlotte did not even feel jealous any longer, or annoyed because Mike really was her son; nor feel an outsider because *she* was the adopted one.

The first talk she had had with her adoptive mother on her return had not been over-sentimental. Anthea remained poised and eminently sensible; but she had taken one of Charlotte's hand in hers in a firm, affectionate grip and talked to her frankly about the affair.

"The longer I've had to think about things, the more I blame myself for what I did," she said. "Quite apart from making the mistake of not *telling* you that you were adopted, I was crazy to let you and everybody else think you were actually my baby."

"Well, let's be frank with each other, Mum darling, I don't deny that," Charlotte had answered but pressed the slim cool fingers affectionately in return. "But—somehow—since seeing the Nagorski family—especially that awful old grandfather—I really appreciate what you and Daddy

are like. Not that I'm a snob. Breeding and so forth don't matter much today if the people are nice. If I'd found an illiterate peasant in France, and he'd been a darling and interested in me, I'm sure I'd have fallen on his bosom." Then with a wry smile Charlotte continued: "My poor real Mama hadn't a big bosom for me to fall on, actually. She's thinner than you, and under all the make-up she looked haggard, I thought. I really am sorry for her. I think she's a slave to that young man she married."

"Perhaps it would be best for you to try not to think any more about her, Charl."

"It all worked out very badly, didn't it?"

"If it brought you closer to us it doesn't matter much, darling."

Then, suddenly, Charlotte leaned forward and kissed Anthea's smooth cheek.

"I do honestly love and admire you, Mummy, and I'll never forget how nice you and Daddy have been to me. Maybe Granny's money was used to a good purpose. It's made her grand-daughter feel utterly relieved that she is or *was* her grand-daughter. In spirit, if not in flesh."

So they had talked together, lightly but with a serious note beneath it all. In summing up they had agreed that it was a good thing Michael had never been told the facts. In a funny way Charlotte felt that her relationship with Michael—the fact that he still believed she really *was* his sister—seemed to strengthen the tie between them all.

"Now," Anthea had ended the session, "we must all start again, and if you don't want to go back at the end of the summer and work for Veronica, you needn't. Let's find something that you really want to do. Of course what *I'd* like, is to see you get married to a really nice young man, and give Daddy the pleasure of taking a beautiful bride up the aisle."

"Have you by any chance got a certain Christopher Rawson in mind?" Charlotte had asked with a wicked glint in her eye.

"Oh, of course not," Anthea had lied shamelessly, and both of them burst out laughing.

Charlotte, at the dinner table, looked at her adoptive father. He was enjoying his cigar, and complaining that he had eaten too much. When she met his gaze, she read once more all the old trust and deep affection in those nice blue eyes. Dear Daddy, she thought; how pleased he had been when she had rushed into his arms earlier this evening, at the station, and told him all that had been happening.

"Don't tell me any more, darling," he had interrupted when she came to the part about 'being sorry for upsetting him'. "I don't want you to apologise. I've got my daughter back. That's all I care about."

It was all she seemed to care about now, too.

Except Luke. She kept remembering Luke and worrying about him; feeling restless, on edge, knowing she would remain so until she had seen him again.

She was a little annoyed to think that Mike had invited the Rawson boy and his friend up here. Why couldn't they have waited till the party tomorrow?

Suddenly Charlotte got up from the table.

"I must get a breath of fresh air. I'll be back in a moment."

"Where are you off to?" asked Mike. "Chris'll be here in a jiffy."

"He can wait," Charlotte said, and slipped into her short white coat.

Like Anthea, she wore slacks; dark blue with a white cashmere cardigan. She tied a chiffon scarf over her hair as she went out. It was usually windy on the cliffs at

night. It was no longer raining. The moon kept peering from behind the banks of ragged cloud. It was not cold.

She ran down the zig-zag path past the village post office, and towards the inn. All the windows were open and brightly lit. A sound of voices, clinking glasses and music from the radio harassed the quiet of the night. She remembered Luke saying how he disliked the Gull Rock Inn until everybody had gone and he could close the bar and hear again the sound of the waves smashing against the rocks and lapping on to the beach.

She felt her heart race. Her cheeks were hot although the breeze was cool against them. Why this restlessness, she wondered . . . these sudden nerves . . . this altogether new, urgent longing to see Luke? What was happening to her now? Was she never going to find peace of mind and settle down to the old calm, uneventful life she used to lead before she knew about her birth and the Nagorskis?

She stepped back into the shadows as a couple of tall young men came out of the little pub and walked in her direction. They did not see her. But she saw them; and the tallest and best-looking one answered her mother's description of Chris, the University student, who had been 'lined up for her'.

She watched him without much interest as he vanished into the night, laughing and talking to his friend. Never had she needed Luke more.

It was silly to come now, of course . . . He would be busy in the bar. Mrs. Martin would wonder, too, why she had come down here like this.

"Impulsive me—round the bend as usual. I'd better go home," Charlotte told herself wryly.

But at that moment the door of the little seaside inn opened again. And this time it was Luke who came out.

Her heart seemed to leap in an unaccustomed way at the

sight of the tall, familiar figure in grey flannels and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Luke, dressed as usual for his work. There was a pipe between his teeth. He stood still and struck a match and lit the pipe, shielding the match in his cupped hands. She had seen him do that so many times. She was filled with sudden tenderness. Her dear Luke; her dearest friend; *her more than friend.*

She called to him softly:

"L–u–uke!"

His head shot up. He threw away the burnt match and looked sharply in her direction. As he recognised her, his face lit up—illuminated by a sudden shaft of the elusive moonlight.

"Charlotte!" he exclaimed, with astonishment.

She ran towards him. Her eyes were shining.

"Luke—hello!"

"Why, hello—wonderful to see you again, love," he said.

He spoke calmly, and they touched hands and no more –like the friends they had always been.

"I didn't expect you down here tonight," he added. "Thought you'd be somewhat embroiled with the family."

"I was. I . . . just wanted to see you for a moment."

"Come in—have a drink. Mama was saying it's ages since she saw you."

Charlotte's urgent emotions suddenly took a downward curve. Her heartbeats slowed. How coolly, how almost indifferently he spoke to her, she thought. Had she lost him? The old friend. The Luke on whose sympathy and understanding and help she had always relied? She felt a sudden cold terror.

"Luke!" she cried his name as though truly afraid. He stared at her, his own pulses quickening. He thought that she looked particularly beautiful with the moonlight

turning her face marble-pale. So slim, so tall, so *young*, with that white scarf tied under her chin.

Her youth had always charmed him in the past. Tonight it disturbed him—warned him to keep away from her; never to lose his head again as he had done in Le Trayas.

"All well with the family?" he asked in a casual voice.

"Yes. Very well, thanks. Just as it always used to be. I—I'm terribly pleased and so are they. My own mother doesn't seem to matter any more. I shall never forget her, of course. But I shan't often remember her. That's the way of it."

"Couldn't be better," said Luke, lightly. "Good thing all round."

She hesitated. He was striking another match, lighting the pipe that had gone out, not looking at her.

"I'd better go home," she said suddenly in a stifled voice.

He took the pipe from his mouth.

"Not coming in to see Mama?"

"No—I—I just wanted a walk. I—we're expecting those boys up home for a drink."

"They've just gone up."

"I saw them."

"Young Christopher has been on the *qui vive* to meet you."

"I'm not interested," she said rather sulkily.

Luke's lips twisted into a smile.

"You might become more so when you meet him. He's a charmer."

"I'm not looking for young men with charm."

Luke put his tongue in his cheek and gave her rather an odd look. He didn't quite understand what had brought her down like this or what was passing through her mind.

He only knew that she had returned to the family circle and that that was, as he had said—good all round. But she hadn't returned to *him*. She was further from him than she had ever been. He dared not let her come near—ever again. That was the hell of it.

"I must get back to the bar," he said. "I've left old Joe coping."

He would have turned away but suddenly she caught his arm. He saw her eyes shining, yet full of a new unhappiness. Something he did not understand had happened to her. But whatever it was, Luke could never bear his Charlotte to be unhappy.

"What's happened now, love?" he asked.

The old familiar question, strangely full of tenderness. It thawed the coldness that was gathering round her heart. She acted on impulse again.

"Luke," she said wildly, "I've upset you. You aren't the same. You haven't been—since we went to France together."

Silence. The wind, freshening, blowing from the Atlantic made the painted sign over the inn swing furiously.

The night was full of the scents of the sea and the sands and the tamarisk bushes, waving on the terrace.

Then Luke said:

"Don't be a little idiot. Of course I'm just the same. Always will be. Get along home, love, and be happy, and captivate young Rawson—which I'm sure you'll do."

"I don't want to captivate him!" she said angrily.

"You can't help captivating people. You're a most attractive and rather dangerous young woman!"

"Dangerous!" she repeated the word scornfully. "I'm not in the least dangerous to *you*. I never have been."

Then his face reddened, hardened, and reddened again. He laughed.

"I don't know what this is all in aid of, but you're being rather stupid, aren't you?"

"No—*you're* the stupid one."

"May I ask why?"

"Because you think you're privileged to fall in love—then fall out of it again when it suits you."

This time the silence between them became so frozen that Charlotte felt positively paralysed—terrified that she had done something irretrievably silly. Luke tried another laugh, with less success. It ended in a cough and he took his pipe out of his mouth again and stuffed it in his pocket.

"What exactly does *that* mean?"

Now she knew, to her delight and her despair that she loved him so much that if he turned away and walked out of her life, nothing would be worth while—nothing, ever again.

"Oh, Luke!" she said, and without pride, with only her love, her sudden great love for him, to give her courage, put her arms round his neck and pressed near to him. "Oh, *Luke*, you great fool—don't you understand? I'm just as much in love with you as you are—or were—with me. I say *were* because it doesn't seem you *are* any more. Didn't you mean what you told me in Le Trayas? Don't you love me any more?"

He seemed so startled, so confused, it prevented him from speaking, for a second. Then he loosened her fingers which she had locked about his neck. He drew away from her.

"You're off your head—quite off it. Run back to 'Windhover' for God's sake, Charlotte, and leave me alone."

She gasped.

"*Luke!* Then you do hate me now? You *are* sorry for what you said to me in the Navirotal Hotel."

He would have been less than human if he had not felt his defences break down when he heard that heart-broken cry. He was utterly astonished that she was so upset because he had rejected her. All kinds of thoughts had been chasing through his mind. Not for a second had he imagined her to be serious; it was just, perhaps, that she had rushed down here on one of her wild impulses . . . or because she felt better about her adoption and was no longer so concerned with her own people; or that she was still in rather a tense mood, and had wanted to see him because he, as usual, was her outlet; she needed the comfort of his arms. But he saw tears in her eyes, and her lips had a woeful downward curve. She said again:

"I've made you hate me. Oh, Luke!" she sobbed.

That was too much for him. He caught her close and kissed her with a fierceness that robbed them both of breath. He pushed the white scarf back from her hair, took a handful of the long silky auburn waves and kissed it, too.

"Oh my love, my love, I could never hate you. I love you with every drop of blood in my body. I told you so in Le Trayas. It was wrong of me. It's wrong of me to tell you so now. But to hell . . . I do love you and I'm not going to let you think otherwise."

She gave a laugh, drawing the back of her hand across her wet eyes and lips like an embarrassed child.

"Well, that's a relief, because I'm crazy about you. I didn't realise it when we were in France but I've thought a whole lot about it since and I've discovered how much you mean to me, Luke, quite apart from our old friendship. This is the first time I've been in love and oh—I'm so glad it's you!"

"I can't believe it yet —" He held her apart from him, staring at her with his astonished, delighted eyes. "You can't mean it, love. You're just round the bend, aren't you?"

"Absolutely," she said, "and, thank the Lord, so are you. We can be locked up together."

"Charlotte, don't make a fool of me, will you?"

"How could I? I've always thought you the most wonderful man in the world. Nobody could make a fool of *you*."

"But, darling, we can't just have a sort of crazy affair, you know. I'm really in love with you and I want to marry you, but for *heaven's sake*—I'm thirty-two and you're only twenty. Your parents would have a fit."

She shook her head, put both hands on his shoulders and looked at him with an ever-increasing sense of well-being and happiness.

"I think they'll be rather pleased if you ask me and, no—don't mention Chris Rawson! He's just a myth in everyone's imagination."

"He's no myth—he's a very nice boy."

"I don't want a nice boy. I'm the sort of girl who wouldn't be happy married to someone of her own age, anyhow. You know what I'm like, darling, I need a strong, much older man to look after me."

Now Luke's lips relaxed. He laughed, caught her close, and put his lips against hers again.

"You've got something there, love," he said.

For a long time they stood there in the darkness, very close, both of them gaining confidence every moment that this was no mere fleeting passion, but an abiding love. For her it was the moment of truth—of discovery that love was as the old verse put it: '*A many splendoured thing*'. For him—the man who had been married before

and had suffered a tragic loss—it was a rediscovering of all the perfection of a woman's nearness and dearness, and of his deathless need of her.

How long they might have gone on standing there, no one could tell, but the door of the inn swung open and Ann Martin called:

"Luke, where are you, dear? You're wanted."

He gave a sigh and released Charlotte.

"I must go. I'm sorry, love, but duty calls."

"Shall I come in and see your mother?"

"No, sweet, not now. Go home. I'll follow later."

"I don't want to leave you."

He drew her hands up to his lips and kissed each in turn.

"You're very sweet and very dear to me. This is such a shattering affair, I haven't yet got my feet firmly on the ground. But as I see things we'll have the rest of our lives together, so don't let's worry about an hour or two wasted on beer and skittles in the old pub."

"Luke, what will your mother say —?"

"She'll be a bit startled at first but I think she'll be glad when she hears how we feel about each other. And knowing my mother, she'll make you very welcome, because you're necessary to me, as well as because you're such a darling."

"I want her to like me. More than she does now, I mean. And I shall love her. It'll be marvellous having her for a mother-in-law."

Luke pressed his cheek against Charlotte's for a second.

"You're a bit greedy. One mother, one adoptive mother, one mother-in-law. All three of them!"

"No," Charlotte whispered. "Only two. My adoptive mother up there in 'Windhover'—and Mrs. Martin. I

really don't want to include my own mother. I've been so wrong about the whole of that show."

"I love you," he said abruptly. "See you later, darling."

She looked after him as he moved away, her heart beating fast with happiness.

"Can I tell the family about us?"

He called back:

"No. I'm going to come up soon. In the most orthodox manner, I shall ask for your hand in marriage."

He was a long way from her now but she called to him loudly through the night:

"If they refuse, I shall still marry you."

He laughed.

"I've never met such a girl. You're a born rebel. You must do what they tell you."

"I'll do what *you* tell me—I swear it."

"I doubt it, but I don't mind. I'll take you on however badly you behave."

And that was the last thing he said before he disappeared into the inn.

She stood a moment, breathless, ecstatic, listening to the sound of the sea and to the music coming through the open window of the inn. She cupped her burning cheeks with both hands and shut her eyes. What a day this had been! And what a night! *Luke was going to marry her.* She adored him and would make up to him for all he had suffered. He was going to look after her till death parted them. Her friend, her husband, her lover.

"I'll make him the best wife in the world," she said. "He deserves it."

She began to run up the zig-zag path towards her home. The tears that were pouring down her cheeks were not of grief but of pure unadulterated joy.

18

A WEEK later, Sophie Richards was sitting up in bed in her flat over the *boutique* in Brighton, reading her daily paper while she sipped the morning tea she had just made. It was a stormy wet day—one of the worst that Brighton could offer at this time of year. She brooded on the fact that there would be few clients in the salon downstairs today with weather like this to keep people off the front.

A glance at the bed next to hers showed the long hump that was Tony's figure, and his dark ruffled head. His face was turned from her. He never woke early. She envied him his ability to sleep. He was always telling her that she was a bundle of nerves, and taunting her about it. She had looked at herself in the mirror as she went along to the kitchen just now and thought how ill she looked—quite definitely her age, at this hour of the morning! It was as well that Tony wouldn't wake for hours yet. Before he was ready for his coffee, she would have made up her face, done her hair and put on a smart dress. She would look as young as he liked her to.

Suddenly all thoughts of Tony and make-up went out of Sophie's head. She generally glanced at the Births, Deaths and Marriages, then the Engagements. She liked her 'decent paper' as she called it and let Tony read the others. She had learned, long since, that her second husband was by no means as cultured as her first. Poor Bill had been well educated and enjoyed good reading.

Her eye was caught suddenly by the name HARVEY. And the Christian name, *Charlotte*. She gave a little gasp and read the paragraph with avid interest. Of course, it was *her* Charlotte. Her little Sophie . . . (how well she remembered the girl telling her her adopted name!).

> The engagement is announced between Luke Maxwell Martin, only son of the late Col. B. Maxwell Martin and of Mrs. Martin of Gull Rock Inn, St. Nevell, and Charlotte Anthea Harvey, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Harvey of Alexandra Square, London, S.W.3. The marriage will take place early in the new year.

Three times, Sophie Richards read this announcement. She was astonished to find how deeply it concerned her. She had never for a moment forgotten that tall auburn-haired girl who looked so like her father, and who had reminded her so painfully of that mad, disastrous affair of twenty-one years ago.

True, she had been relieved to see Charlotte go away, yet ever since had felt a sadness quite foreign to her true nature which was, in reality, a shallow one. She had never had deep feelings. She remembered the fact that she hadn't at all minded her baby being adopted. She was a man's woman—not a born mother.

But it was a pity the girl had ever come into her life to upset her. She was sorry, too, if she had hurt Charlotte—disappointed her. But the girl had only herself to blame. She shouldn't have come. These Adoption Societies were absolutely right to keep the mothers who bore the children, and the women who adopted them, for ever apart. It was a knot that should be absolutely and finally

severed like the umbilical cord at birth; separating the two lives for ever.

Charlotte should never have tried to trace her, the silly girl.

Just fancy if Tony had found out! Just *fancy!* It would have wrecked her marriage.

Sophie read the announcement again. Who was Luke Maxwell Martin, she wondered? She hoped he was nice. Hoped he had some money, too. Hoped the girl would be happy. She was a pretty, nicely-brought-up girl; she should be all right. Those Harveys seemed to have been very good to her.

Suddenly Sophie Richards threw the paper down. She felt that she was going to burst into tears. In horror she looked at Tony's recumbent form, got out of bed and carried her tea-tray into the kitchen, her hands trembling.

"Oh, God," she said, the tears pouring down her face, "I hope she'll be happy. Happier than her own mother has ever been. I'd like to have wished her luck. Maybe I'll send her a telegram. No, I can't. I mustn't. It's all over. I don't ever want to get in touch with her or see her again."

She heard a voice from the bedroom.

'Soph-ie, Soph . . . where are you?"

Hastily she dried her tears, dashed some powder on her cheeks and outlined her lips with a vivid lipstick.

"Okay—coming, darling," she called back gaily. "You're awake with the lark this morning."

She walked into the bedroom, smiling brilliantly at her young husband.

Charlotte was forgotten. Charlotte hadn't existed in her thoughts for twenty years. Why let the memory trouble her today?

THE END

Charlotte Harvey's very world seemed to collapse around her when she accidentally discovered that she was an adopted child. Determined to track down her real mother, she was opposed by her adoptive parents and only her old friend Luke agreed to help her in the search.

But it was a long trail and, for Charlotte, a sobering one. Only Luke was always constant in his support as she gradually uncovered the truth . . .

'The Queen of Romance still reigns'

Daily Express

'Rarely has any writer of our times delved so deeply into the secret places of a woman's heart'

Taylor Caldwell

Denise Robins

CORONET BOOKS/HODDER PAPERBACKS LTD.

Fiction : Romance

ISBN 0 340 10882 7

UNITED KINGDOM	35p
AUSTRALIA	$1.10*
NEW ZEALAND	$1.10
CANADA	$1.25

*recommended but not obligatory